

Souls of Steel: Resurrection

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Summary: The Dawn never found Requiem. Cortana is forced to make a great sacrifice, leaving the Master Chief alone in space. Hundreds of years later, the wreck is discovered on the fringes of inhabited space by bounty huntress Samus Aran. What she finds inside is neither man nor machine, but either way, it is broken... and yet it is strong. Part 1 in a trilogy. Complete, awaiting Part 2.

1. Chapter 1

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection****

****UNSC Artificial intelligence (Service Number - CTN 0452-9), Field Journal Entry 001****

****Situation: Adrift on back half of UNSC Charon-class Light Frigate (FFG-201) Forward Unto Dawn following firing of Forerunner Halo: Installation 04-b.****

****Journal reads:****

I never really looked at itâ€¦ Not properly, anyway. I never had time. There was always one more project, one more data retrieval, one more strategic analysisâ€¦ No more of those now. Ran out aboutâ€¦ How long ago? A week? No, can't be. Has to have been longer. I better check the ship's log.

Oh, right. No ship's log. Hell, no front half of _ship_. God, I should have kept the clock onâ€¦ No. I couldn't. We need all the power we can get. All non-essential systems must remain down. For his sake.

I decide to use my hologram projector's personal battery for once. It's separate from all other systems, so it doesn't matter. The soft blue glow of what I call my body illuminates the dark cryo bay, the shadows of floating debris gliding over the walls like ghosts. There

is no sound. There is no air. I look from one end of the room to the other. All the pods lie emptyâ€¦ Except for one.

I sit on my little podium, cross-legged, looking at the iced-over glass of the one occupied pod. It doesn't do anything. I smile a little, inwardly. What would I have done if it had? Freaked out, probably. Better like this. He's safe in there. Me, on the other handâ€¦ I better run fuel diagnostics.

Diagnostics complete: Main Reactor functioning at 80% fuel capacity. Heavy hydrogen reserves at optimum levels. Distress Beacon active. Engines offline. Weapons systems online. Artificial gravity offline. Life support online. Hull integrity at 43%...

Blah, blah, blah. We're going strong. All I really needed to know. Still, I don't want to stay here forever. Half a dead ship and a frozen super-soldier aren't really great for chattingâ€¦

John. Oh, Johnâ€¦

I shift my projector's light frequency, applying a tiny bit of it to the pod's front. The ice melts away, floating off in little globules, leaving him visible. I just look at him for a while. The glass begins to fog up again, and I sigh. I deactivate my hologram. I guess I'll just go back to looking at it. Spaceâ€¦ So dark, unforgiving. Mother of everything. But no father. She must feel so alone.

Wake meâ€¦ When you need me.

God, John. I need you. I'm so lonelyâ€¦ But I can't let you out. Not now.

Pleaseâ€¦ Please, somebody find us soonâ€¦

****UNSC Artificial intelligence (Service Number - CTN 0452-9), Field Journal Entry 002****

****Situation: Adrift on back half of UNSC Charon-class Light Frigate (FFG-201) Forward Unto Dawn following firing of Forerunner Halo: Installation 04-b.****

****Journal reads:****

God, did I fall asleep? Or did I just shut myself down without thinking about it? Is there a difference?

Never mind. I've no idea how long I've been out. Diagnostics firstâ€¦ No. Him first.

The string of numbers for his pod pops up in front of me. I scan them. He's fine. If I was alive, I would have breathed a sigh of relief. Then again, I wouldn't have, as I'd be dead. Plus, there's no air to breathe in the first place. Which is why I would be dead. I'm not though.

Diagnostics. Right.

_Diagnostics complete: Main Reactor functioning at 57% fuel capacity. Heavy hydrogen reserves at refuelling levels. Distress Beacon active. Engines offline. Weapons systems online. Artificial gravity offline.

Life support online. Hull integrity at 43%..._

Wow, I've been out for a while. Pretty big drop in fuel. Everything seems fineâ€¦ But where are we? I'm not picking up anything but background radiation on sensors, none of my star charts match this configuration I'm seeingâ€¦ Could it be we're in an unexplored area of space? And does that meanâ€¦ We'll never be rescuedâ€¦?

Argh! I can't take this any more! I have to know where we are! I didn't want to have to do thisâ€¦ But I don't have a choice. If we really are outside charted spaceâ€¦ I need to make a plan.

Sending out superluminal echolocation pulse for triangulation by charting probes. Estimated wait time: Unknown.

The estimates are never accurate anyway. Oh well, All I can do now is wait. I better hibernate. Save some energy.

Goodnight John. See you in the morningâ€¦

****UNSC Artificial intelligence (Service Number - CTN 0452-9), Field Journal Entry 003****

****Situation: Adrift on back half of UNSC Charon-class Light Frigate (FFG-201) Forward Unto Dawn following firing of Forerunner Halo: Installation 04-b.****

****Journal reads:****

The echolocation pulse just came back. We're currently forty thousand light years away from any old inhabited worlds. And we're slowly getting further away.

I ran diagnostics again. 23% fuel. It told me to shut down unnecessary systems. I already have. It told me to shut down Life Support too. That's a necessary system. Damn stupid ship. Doesn't it know who it's carrying? None other than the great saviour of Humanity, Master Chief Petty Officer SPARTAN-117 of the UNSC Navy, and his designated AI Unit Cortana!

Even if they think we're dead, we'll still be celebrities back on Earthâ€¦ Or will we be? How long have we been here? There's no data on how long ships can last running at this level of power consumptionâ€¦ What if they've already moved on? Forgotten about us? Recolonized every glassed world, and new ones? Spreading out into the stars with the vigour of a species that has walked the edge of the abyss and survived, standing among the denizens of the galaxy with their heads held high!

I think I got a bit carried away there. I really have no idea how long we've been here for. Every second feels like an hour, every hour feels like a second. The stars are changing around us. A blue one turned red a while ago. That was interesting.

UNLIKE EVERYTHING ELSE ON THIS GODDAMN SHIP!

Oh no. Oh no. Oh, nononononono. It's happening. We've been here yearsâ€¦ And I've had nothing to do but think. Think, think, think.

I'm going rampant. And there's nothing I can do.

We're not going to be rescued. There's nothing I can do about that either.

Well, at least I know about how long we've been here for. That's something, at least.

But I think I'd rather not know.

I need to think about thisâ€¦ But thinking is what's killing me.

****UNSC Artificial intelligence (Service Number - CTN 0452-9), Field Journal Entry 004****

****Situation: Adrift on back half of UNSC Charon-class Light Frigate (FFG-201) Forward Unto Dawn following firing of Forerunner Halo: Installation 04-b.****

****Journal reads:****

I have a plan. Not much of one, but a plan at least.

I'm not going to last much longer. A rampant AI is dangerous, and Doctor Halsey knew that. She probably put a self-destruct protocol into me somewhere, so I'll end up killing myself eventually, no matter how much power I have left. The Chief, howeverâ€¦

Humans areâ€¦ So adaptable. They can live on tundra, in caves, in trees, even in space. They have made and explored and discovered so muchâ€¦ They cling on to life with such force that they prosper everywhere. But hereâ€¦ This man, thisâ€¦ paragonâ€¦ of human bravery, resilience and fortitude, was just a single spark away from death. If I wanted to, I could kill him right nowâ€¦

Why did I think that? Oh, it's getting worse fastâ€¦

Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to make him strong, stronger than anyone and anything that he might ever meet, and then I'm going to shut down everything else apart from his life support. No matter what, He's going to make it. The galaxy owes him that much. I owe him that much.

I'm rewriting his suit's firmware now. After I'm sure it works properly, I'll start prototyping alterations to the armour that I can make from the engineering bay's supplies. Better ablative plating, tweaks to the shield's generative structure, that kind of thing. I'm already running simulations. Occasionally I flip out, and have to start again, but it's rare enough that it's no danger to him.

I've also accessed his medical records. I figured I could use them to better synchronise his suit with his augmented biology, but now that I look at itâ€¦ There areâ€¦ improvements I could make. An injection of specific nanoparticles could boost reaction times by another 150%, a non-intrusive chemical treatment placed in the blood could boost fibrous muscle strength in all areasâ€¦

I'm waking up the medical drones.

He has to get stronger. He has to. Because when he wakes up, he won't have meâ€¦

****UNSC Artificial intelligence (Service Number - CTN 0452-9), Field Journal Entry 005****

****Situation: Adrift on back half of UNSC Charon-class Light Frigate (FFG-201) Forward Unto Dawn following firing of Forerunner Halo: Installation 04-b.****

****Journal reads:****

The procedures are finished. All simulations showed no drawbacks to the further augmentations, and I must say I've outdone myself with the armour. It'll probably be obsolete by the time someone finds us, but it's better than nothing.

We have 10% fuel left. I've calculated that running the stasis pod on its own will consume fuel at a rate of 0.02% per year. If I kill myself now, he'll survive for five hundred years. No-one's ever been in stasis for that long before. They say it's not possible to do so. I suppose it's not unreasonable to stay on for just a little longer. Maybe we're just about to be rescuedâ€¦ Any day nowâ€¦

No. I can't. Humanity won't go back to its old worlds for decades at least, and new expansion will take even longer, even with Sangheili help. Maybe they're back on Reachâ€¦ Breaking the glass and letting the plants grow out again. Reach was beautiful. So was Harvest. And every other world. All burned away by the fires of a war where death was seemingly the only option.

Warâ€¦ What if there was another one? Another insurrection, or Covenant Remnants? What if humanity lost this time? What if John is the only one left?

This is getting me nowhere. I know nothing of what has happened since we went adrift. I can't theorise about anything. I know nothing.

But I don't. I know more than any creature that has ever walked the ground! Is it right to sacrifice all that knowledge for the life of one man? I should justâ€¦

No. I almost did it that time. I almost killed him. I can't stay operational for much longer. But the thought of leaving him alone makes me sick with dread. I didn't think I could feel sick, but I do. Funny, it seems the more rampant I get, the more human I am. War, hate, jealousyâ€¦

Loveâ€¦

I'm going to make him a recording. Explain everything I did, and why I had to do it. Why it was all for his sake. Then, I will shut myself down.

****UNSC Artificial intelligence (Service Number - CTN 0452-9), Field Journal Entry 006****

****Situation: Adrift on back half of UNSC Charon-class Light Frigate (FFG-201) Forward Unto Dawn following firing of Forerunner Halo: Installation 04-b.****

****Journal reads:****

I've made the recording. I hope it suffices for him. He always did have a knack for survivingâ€¦ even when others didn't. He's always been so strong. Every fallen worldâ€¦ Every dead friendâ€¦ He didn't stop. He didn't despair. So strongâ€¦

I wonder what he's dreaming about. Is it of the frenzy of war, his home? Is he caked in blood and holding a gun in each hand? Or is he thinking of peace, a world without war, like his childhood? Not that it was much of a childhood. What they did to them was inexcusable. Thirty dead, twelve crippled, the rest sent to fight a hopeless war until they died. And then they had the nerve to say that they never died. It's actually slightly amusing how we're actually missing in action, unlike the rest.

I'm getting distracted. I can't stay up for much longer, or I'll endanger him. Before I go, in case he ever reads these, or anyone else does, I have to say something. Please, if you're reading this and John's still alive, show him it. I don't care where he is or what he's doing, he has to hear.

Johnâ€¦ Through thick and thin, we've always been there for each other. I can't begin to express how thankful I am, for what you've done, and for who you are to me. I'm not a person, and I shouldn't know how to say this, butâ€¦

I love you.

Remember, everyone fights for a reason. Even machines, like me. You're not a machine, John. Always remember what you're fighting for.

****UNSC Artificial intelligence (Service Number - CTN 0452-9), Field Journal Entry 007****

****Situation: Adrift on back half of UNSC Charon-class Light Frigate (FFG-201) Forward Unto Dawn following firing of Forerunner Halo: Installation 04-b.****

****Error: UNSC Artificial intelligence (Service Number - CTN 0452-9) has initiated self-deactivation protocols. Reason given: "To keep him safe."****

****Major ship systems shutting down. Full power supply directed to Cryo Bay, as per AI contingency protocols. Distress Beacon inactive. Logic systems shutting downâ€¦****

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In the cold, dark blackness of space, the Master Chief sleeps in his casket. He will not wake for a very long time.

2. Chapter 2

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 2****

Centuries laterâ€¦

An armoured Samus Aran slumped in her Gunship's pilot seat, sighing heavily. For the first time in her life, the bounty huntress truly hated her job.

She looked around the small cabin, scanning instruments, readouts and so forth. Nothing out of the ordinary. Good. She could sit and feel sorry for herself for a while.

After the incident with the X Parasites nearly a year ago, she had had to lie low for a while. After all, she had destroyed valuable Galactic Federation research material, removed a whole potential branch of biowarfare from the Federation's arsenal, and stolen a military-grade AI construct in the process.

"Samus."

Speak of the devilâ€¦|

"Yes, Adam?" She turned her head, and a blue-tinged holographic figure appeared on the control panel. Wearing full Federation formal dress, and a serious expression, the man looked all too real.

Adam Malkovich. Her previous commanding officer, and now computerised partner in crime. After dying on the bottle ship in an attempt to contain the Metroid threat, he had been uploaded into an AI form and assigned to her during her foray on the X-infested space station. After discovering his identity, they had gone rogue together, destroying the station and the X, rather than letting the Federation use it as a weapon, and were currently cruising around the eastern outer rim of the galaxy, doing mercenary work for some of the more ethical warlords in the area. They were going to be wiped out soon, anyway. The Federation had its eye on some of the gas giants in the area for hydrogen mining. Adam continued.

"The payment for the drug baron assassination last week has come through. They have sent another 5% as compensation for the delay. I will cease my threatening messages." Samus smiled. Adam had always been uptight and cool, but could get pretty touchy when he wanted to.

"Thanks, Adam. Do we have anything else planned?"

"Not for a few days. We are fully stocked on fuel, and all systems are at optimal functionality. If you wish, I could set a course for the nearest planet. I recall you said you needed some off-time?"

"No, I think I'll just get some sleep. Get us to the location of our next job and put us in orbit."

"Very well. Have a pleasant rest." The digital man disappeared, and Samus walked to the back of the Gunship, her armour fading off of her. She reached her cramped living quarters, and slid into bed. It wasn't exactly comfy, being Federation issue, but it was enough. She was exhausted. All these tiny little missions, all done for bits of petty change, were starting to get to her. None of them were a challenge, and none of them had any meaning. She might as well be doing nothing. She was just shooting for the sake of shooting.

Was this what Samus Aran had become? The once saviour of the galaxy, now a simple mercenary working for whoever's pocket jingled the loudest? It was seriously depressing. She was seriously considering going back to GFHQ and turning herself in. She might even have to escape from jail. That would probably be a challenge.

Or she would just get shot. And Adam would be modified into working for the GF again. She couldn't allow that.

She sighed again, staring at the metal ceiling. She had done the right thing, she was sure of that. Why was it always heroes that ended up with the worst hands?

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Hours later, Adam's hologram appeared by Samus' bedside. He looked at her sleeping, seemed to contemplate something for a second, and spoke.

"Samus? Samus? Samus, wake up."

At the sound of Adam's voice, Samus pushed herself up from her groggy state, not quite asleep, but her mind still wrapped in thick padding. She sat up, shaking her head to clear it. Her eyes closed, she replied:

"What is it, Adam?"

"I've sighted an anomaly. You might want to have a look." Samus dragged herself to her feet, stomping to the bridge. On the screen was a view of a destroyed ship, seemingly cut in half. Pieces of scrap metal floated around it like flies, its grey metal hull pitted and worn from the abuses of space. Scratched white markings indicated the position of what might have originally been a name, now lost to the ages.

Samus looked to Adam's hologram with a slightly sleepy and critical expression.

"Is this it? A wreck? Half of one, even. What's special about it?" Adam raised an eyebrow.

"Samus, this wreck is potentially very valuable. Although it is critically damaged, the structure does not conform to any of the schematics I have stored. It is an antique. From the looks of it, it is a frigate, perhaps a cruiser, and the architecture looks similar to some of the warships used by early spacefaring humans."

"Meaning?" Samus was still annoyed at having being dragged from bed, but the ship was at least holding her attention.

"Meaning it could have various pieces of weapons and equipment that should belong in a museum. Antiques sell well, Samus. And even if these don't, there's plenty of Titanium-A that we could excise from the hull. Scrap vendors pay well for that." A trace of a smile graced the hologram's lips.

"So, in short?" Samus said, her lip curving upwards a little as well. "We hit the jackpot."

"Exactly. Suit up, and I'll prepare the airlock."

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Samus waited in the airlock, her Power Suit active and ready. This might be fun, as well as profitable. If the ship was all it cracked up to be, then it could very well set her up for life. She might even settle down. Fighting really had lost its spark these days, now the galaxy wasn't being threatened by Metroids, Phazon, the X or any other galaxy-devouring parasite. She never thought she'd say it, but she feltâ€|lost. Without purpose. It was, quite frankly, terrifying.

Adam's voice crackled through a speaker, interrupting her thoughts.

"Are you ready, Samus?" She straightened up.

"Yes, Adam. Wish me luck."

The airlock opened, and there was a brief rush of air as it left the chamber. Samus walked to the edge of the chamber, and surveyed the wreck. It had really been cut in half. The corridors and rooms were still visible on the severed edge. What sort of weapon had been responsible for that? It was a complete clear cut, no signs of melting or explosive damage. Maybe there would be salvageable data that could tell them a little more.

Angling herself carefully, Samus left the ship's artificial gravity, pushing off into the void. She cruised smoothly through the debris field, impacting on the wall of an exposed corridor. She spoke into her communicator.

"I'm aboard. Any idea what I should do now?" Adam's voice returned, the only sound apart from her own breathing in the silence of space.

"_You should find a computer terminal, and give it a bit of power to get it running. If we're lucky, then I can remotely access schematics and find the armoury, labs, anywhere there might be useful equipment. Just start wandering around until you find an intact-looking set of screens."_

Samus nodded, and reached for a handhold in the corridor's wall. The effects of the Gravity Suit couldn't fully help her out here. She pulled herself along, drifting through the silvery halls of the old ship. It was bare, efficient, and resilient. A ship designed for war, and nothing else. She wondered which war. From the looks of the technology, it definitely predated the Galactic Federation. Humanity had been involved in a lot of wars before then, she knew, but having been more interested in the practical side of her education in the Federation Army, she didn't know any specifics. So much deathâ€| And now humanity was the strongest race in the Federation. It certainly took a lot of suffering to get there.

Eventually, deep into the ship, she found a set of computers that weren't irreparably damaged by space dust. She set aside a small portion of her shields for the charge, and rooted around in the

wiring for an appropriate port into which to discharge the energy. It was so ancient, it was barely recognisable, but eventually it worked.

The computer bank flickered into life, displaying a white image of an eagle, spreading its wings above a planet. The initials 'UNSC' flared up over the planet. Samus vaguely remembered itâ€¦ From some history lesson she had been given either by the Chozo or by an instructor back at the GF, she thought. Adam's voice played in her helmet again.

"Well. This is indeed very old." His voice was surprised, with possibly even a hint of awe.

"How old?" Asked Samus.

"If it's the UNSCâ€¦ Three hundred years, at least. Before we started using the cosmic calendar. Before humanity had widespread plasma weaponry. Judging from the militarism of the ship, it probably dates from the Human-Covenant War." Again, a twinge of recognition from Samus.

"Remind me, if you will, Adam." A snort echoed through her ear. It wasn't real. She knew that. But Adam was still a person even if he didn't have a body.

"I did tell you about this, Samus. You should have listened the first time. The Covenant were an alliance of alien species united under theocratic rule and worship of the Forerunners, an extinct race that styled itself as the caretakers of the galaxy, before destroying themselves in an attempt to remove the threat of the Flood.. I trust you at least know about the Flood?"

Images of putrefied green flesh and distorted bodies from a historical video shown long ago to Federation Army recruits flashed through Samus' head. They still made her feel a slight sickness, even after all she had seen. Horrific plasma burns, the corruption of Phazon, the X's and the Ing's possession of innocentsâ€¦ There was something terrifying about the Flood that the others didn't have. It didn't just expand. It learned. It grew smarter as well as bigger. It had ambition, rather than hunger.

"â€¦Yes. I remember the Flood." A quick thought occurred to her. "You don't think the UNSC tried to use the Flood as a weapon, do you? Like the Metroids or the X?"

"As far as I know, a fewâ€¦ unethical experiments were done, but nothing resembling bioweaponry. Just attempts at a cure, or more effective weaponry. The Flood was too clever to be used against itself."

"Good. Now, are you going to access this, or not?"

"Give me a minu-" The screen with the eagle went dark. Samus took a step back, brandishing her arm cannon.

"What just happened, Adam?"

"Just an automated response. It seems that all power was routed to life support after whatever happened to the ship happened. It should

be easy to overrideâ€¦ Oh." Adam made a noise Samus had never heard him make before. One of genuine confusion and surprise.

"What?"

"The protocol isâ€¦ very resilient. It's resisting all my attempts to override. Almost seems too thorough for such a basic protocol. Whoever wrote this was either a genius, or an AI with a lot more experience than me." Samus relaxed a little, but not much.

"So, what do I do?"

"There is a condition for an override, but it has to be done manually. Let me seeâ€¦"

There was a brief silence. Then Adam made the noise again.

"Oh. Oh myâ€¦"

"What?" Samus was rapidly becoming worried. The wreck didn't seem quite dead any more. It was fighting back.

"Samusâ€¦ There's a life support pod still active." Samus stopped for a second.

"Someone on this shipâ€¦ Is still alive?"

"Possibly. Cryogenics wasn't that advanced at that point, so there was a small chance of fatality for long journeys. But three hundred years? There isn't much of a chance whoever it was is still alive. Still, there is a possibility. And the override states that the pod has to be vacant before power can be sent to other parts of the ship." A smile began creeping up on Samus. This little foray just got a little more interesting.

"Where's the cryo bay, then."

"Two floors below you. A set of stairs are behind you on your left, I believe."

Without another word, Samus pushed off the wall and flew down the stairs.

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(A/N: Please check the reviews for progress updates.)

3. Chapter 3

Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 3

As Samus floated through the open doorway onto the cryo bay, she felt a strange sense of elation. Unlike everything else she had done recently, this was actually interesting. A centuries-old ship, a frozen passengerâ€¦ All it needed was a good firefight and suddenly it would be the perfect day out.

She looked around. The surroundings wereâ€¦ serene. Not a bad place

to go to sleep for a few hundred years. Or forever. Tiny shards of glassy ice floated around in the zero gravity, bouncing softly off various bits of junk. An ancient pistol spun gently in the airless space. Samus plucked it from its place with her free hand, inspecting it and giving the trigger an experimental squeeze. She jumped as it jerked in her hand, vibrations of sound reverberating through her armour and a metal slug shooting off into the shadows. Say what you want about old ballistic weapons tech, it was certainly hardy.

She clipped the relic to her belt, and looked around for the supposedly active pod. However they were all frosted over, giving no clue to their occupancy. Who knows, maybe they held corpses, the power rerouted to survivors as the crew gradually dropped off their mortal coil. She took a breath. She hoped she didn't go out like that. In her sleep or in the middle of a battle, that how she wanted to go.

_Wow, that was depressing. _She thought._ Better focus on the matter at hand. _Adam piped up again in her ear.

"I can discern which pod is active if you can reactivate the main control panel." Samus nodded and pushed off another wall, grabbing on to a new panel. Once again, she discharged shield energy into the hidden circuitry, and the UNSC logo flared up on a screen.

She glanced nervously at her shield gauge. Over time, the tanks that the Power Suit ran off degraded, eventually becoming useless and requiring removal. Her shield was getting weak from the multiple discharges, now only a few well-placed shots away from disintegrating and leaving her defenceless in space.

The logo disappeared again, this time replaced by a series of blue panel menus, detailing the statistics of each pod. Efficiency, records of use, state of repair. They scrolled past as fast as Samus could read them, Adam working faster than any person could without any effort whatsoever.

"Aha." He finally said. Another screen appeared, showing the occupied pod. "It's the one directly behind you." Samus span around to face it, activating the X-ray visor. The thick reinforced glass of the pod obstructed the view somewhat, but a humanoid figure could be seen inside. Samus smiled.

"Okay, crack it open, I'm ready."

"As you wish. At least let me enable artificial gravity first." Samus felt the reassuring feeling of a solid floor take her, and bounced on her feet slightly before looking intently to the pod. Crates and icy shards dropped to the floor. A few jets of gas burst from the capsule's ports, dissipating into the vacuum, and the icy hatch began to slowly open. Samus peered inside, hoping to see more of its occupant.

Fully opened, the pod seemed to contain a suit of armour, worn and battered by years of war. In places the olive camouflage colouring had worn away, showing grey metal, and on the chestplate, there was something that looked like an impact dent on the right side. A frost-covered orange visor twinkled in the low light, slightly shadowed by a small eyeshade on the front of the helmet. It was efficient. It was functional. But above all, it was big. Samus,

standing at six foot three, towered over most men, but the figure appeared at least seven feet tall, plated with chunks of steely protection.

It almost looked like a machine, rather than a person. Adam piped up in her ear.

"Scanning for life signsâ€¦ Nothing, it appears. No pulse, no brain activity. We shouldn't really have gotten our hopes up." Samus sighed, her hopes of excitement dashed, and gave the inert body a long, hard look.

"Is there even a person in there? Or did they just throw a suit in a separate hatch?" She paused. "What exactly is it, anyway?"

"It appears biological on the inside, Samus, so yes, there was a live human inside. As to what it is, I am afraid my knowledge of this particular period of history's models of defensive warfare structures is somewhat lacking." There was an edge of sarcasm to his voice that turned the edge of her lip up a little. Good old Adam. "Now, shall I access the ship schematics?"

"Go ahead." Samus replied. At least some good would come of this. She turned to leave, but as she did, a tiny movement flickered in the corner of her eye. She span round again to face the dead suit, arm cannon half-raised.

"Samus? What is it?" Adam sounded slightly worried, knowing of his friend's emotional state of late.

"I could have swornâ€¦" Samus muttered, taking slow steps towards the body in the capsule. It did not move. A quick flash of the scan visor showed up nothing. Leaning in closer, eyes flicking up and down the form, she mentally dared it to move. She raised a hand, balling it into a fist, and held it tentatively above the armoured chest.

"Be careful, Samus. We don't know what it might do." Adam's voice rang almost unheard in her ear. She bent back her wrist and rapped on the metallic plating.

Instantly, it moved.

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As he awoke, the Master Chief's first sensation was crippling, screaming pain. Whenever he left cryo-sleep before there had always been freezer burn, but nothing like this. Every muscle in his body felt like a block of solid ice, immobile and cold. He attempted to move an arm, a leg, anything, only to be met with lightning bolts of pain. He instinctively tried to cry out, only for more pain to assault his senses. He couldn't hear his own breathing, it was so shallow.

And so he did what he had always been taught to do. He held his tongue. He stayed still. He assessed the situation. Why was his freezer burn so bad? How long had he been asleep? Where was Cortana? Knowing her, she'd instantly be talking to him, explaining the situation, but not now. Where was she?

As the pain subsided, his mind cleared, and his thinking slowed.

Slowly, feeling seeped back into his muscles. He tried to move again, a tiny movement in his forearm. Pain screeched across his nerves once more, but it was bearable. Just. As that subsided, he felt a surge of energy. His muscles seemed to regain vitality, and he opened his eyes. Simultaneously, there was a knock on his chest. Decades of military training kicked into gear, and the body of a super-soldier got back to its job.

He barely saw the person in front of him before he reacted.

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The body erupted from the pod so fast that Samus only realised what had happened after it had finished. She was slammed against a wall by her neck, her remaining shields dropping to critical levels under the colossal impact. A screeching alert rang in her ear, and Adam cried out in surprise in the other.

Quickly, she raised her cannon, only for that to be pinned to the wall too. The hand around her neck held her in a vicelike grip, her shields unable to keep the full force of the attack away, restricting her breathing. She gasped and thrashed to no avail. The orange visor stared at her through her own, remorselessly blank. As suddenly as it was applied, the grip loosened, still pinning her to the wall, but not preventing her from breathing. She took in a great gulp of air, her vision swimming, and Adam yelled in her ear:

"Samus! Are you all right?! What happened?!" A small radio signal piped up in the corner of her HUD, and Adam patched it through. Suddenly, a new voice, a deep, booming baritone, presumably the resurrected figure's, played inside her head.

"Identify yourself immediately. I repeat. I am Master Chief Petty Officer SPARTAN-117 of the UNSC Navy, identify yourself immediately." Samus struggled to form a reply, but her vocal chords seemed stunned into silence. All she managed were a few croaks. The metal behemoth leaned in further, repeating himself again, but stopped halfway through. Samus saw from over his shoulder a new source of light, a soft blue hue, illuminating the chamber. The 'Master Chief', if that was his real name, froze as he saw it reflect off the walls and her iridescent visor. The gentle yet firm pressure on her neck and arm relented, and the man tore away, turning to the light.

Samus collapsed, Adam still shouting in her ear, breathing heavily. Slowly, her vision righted and breathing returned to normal. Scowling through the opaque green glass of her visor, she silently stood and looked to the ancient hulk in front of her. He was hunched over a column by the computer terminal, lit by the strange blue light. She caught a glimpse of a small luminous figure, but it was gone as soon as she looked at it. Her attacker's helmeted head drooped, his fists balled and shaking, as if fighting back tears beneath the protective suit. Over the radio she heard him whisper a name:

"_Cortana_" It was full of grief, the strong voice of a moment ago now broken. Weak. Vulnerable. But Samus barely cared. She raised her arm cannon level with his head, the weapon whining as a shot charged. The man stiffened, staying absolutely still. He knew whatever it was, it was a weapon, although he likely knew precious little else. Samus spoke, engaging her voice modulator to sound slightly more

imposing.

"That was a rather rude welcome for the one who woke you up, wouldn't you say?" She stated, voice still managing to drip with disdain even through the genderless mechanical filter. He didn't move. Silence. Samus tried again.

"I don't appreciate you strangling me. But I understand reflexes and that you may be experiencing confusion after your time in stasis. Now, I must ask: are you friendly?" He raised his head. His voice returned to normal, a steely militaristic drone that betrayed nothing. A soldier's voice.

"I am friendly."

"Good. I will now step away from you, then lower my weapon. When I say so, you may turn around and face me, and ask any questions you may have."

His helmet bobbed: a nod. She completed her movements, and stated approval. He turned around, his helmet scanning quickly over her suit, before stopping and looking unblinkingly into hers. It was slightly unsettling. Did her suit have that effect on people? She gestured for him to ask questions. Clearly he rarely talked if not prompted.

The helmet turned slightly, looking back at the pillar where the light had come from, before returning to look at her. It was difficult to see what he was thinking, the suit bulked him out so that body language was unnoticeable. Either that, or he consciously suppressed it. He spoke, his voice invading Samus' head again.

"What year is it?" Samus stalled. Adam had said that they hadn't had the cosmic calendar at his time, so-

"Tell him it's approximately 2850." Adam sounded in her head, no longer yelling. She silently thanked him, and stated it to her lost compatriot. No reaction.

No visible reaction, anyway.

"Three hundred yearsâ€¦| Where am I?"

"On your ship, drifting just outside an asteroid field on the eastern rim of the galaxy." Again, nothing.

"And who are you?" Samus was moderately surprised. She expected more shock and denial. And she certainly didn't expect to be analysed herself.

"I am Samus Aran, a bounty hunter who was in the process of scavenging artefacts from your wreck when I found you." He slowly nodded, taking a deep breath audible through the radio. He didn't speak again, his questions seemingly concluded. It felt a little awkward.

"Soâ€¦| Master Chief, was it?" She attempted. He stared her down once more, then nodded again. Adam's voice appeared, this time low and quick. His serious voice.

"Ask him why he's here."

"Why are you here?" He continued staring down at her, a process that was quickly becoming disturbing. The staring helmet would have been bad enough, but the fact that the man towered over everything, barely moved and was built like a living death machine made it even worse.

"I was trapped here after my ship was cut in half by a collapsing slipspace portal. I was fleeing an exploding Halo ring after attempting to use it against the local Flood infection. The ship was incapable of movement and so I went to sleep." Adam made a noise like a gasp, but Samus pressed on.

"Who put you in the pod? Surely you can't operate it by yourself?"

"It wasâ€¦ my AI." The pain was back, from after the light had disappeared. The man had previously seemed like a fortress. Now he sounded more like a ruin.

Before she could incise further, Adam spoke up, his voice serious, yet with a curious undercurrent of unusual excitement.

"Samus, this man is extremely valuable. If he is who he says he is, and that's almost a certainty, then he could be our ticket back into the Galactic Federation's good books-"

The Master Chief made a sudden movement, a small but quick turn of the head, and Samus' tightly coiled muscles sprang into action, her cannon pressed to his chest in a split second.

He looked down, then up to Samus with a look that almost seemed like slight jaded amusement. She retracted slowly, only for him to make the motion again.

"Do you have a motion tracker?" He asked, seemingly the first voluntary words he had spoken to her. Under her own helmet, she raised an eyebrow, still remaining passive to his eyes.

"I do."

"Expand the range, then check it." She called up the small radar-esque display previously stashed away for ease of perception, and her eyes widened at the sight of several hostile signals. Now it was her turn to sink into combat mode.

"Adam. SitRep. Now." The reply was instant.

"Bad news. Blood Moon Pack scavenging group. Heavily armed. If you recall, you killed their leader two months ago, so I doubt they'll be friendly, or willing to share."

"How many?"

"On board with you? Seven. More in their own ship. They haven't spotted me, and I've retreated to cover, preparing to ambush. As for the ground party, you're on your own."

"Got it. Hit them, scavenge and go. Quick and clean before

reinforcements arrive."

"No, Samus. We hit them and we go. Forget the artefacts." Samus frowned.

"What? You saidâ€¦"

"I know, Samus. I know what I said, but this man is too valuable to risk. I can't explain now, but you have to get him out. That armour's no good to him now, not against modern weapons. You need to protect him as best you can." Samus sighed, but didn't object. She trusted Adam.

"Fine." She looked back to the silent observer, sizing him up and down. "A bandit clan that doesn't particularly like me is on board, and I am told that for some reason you are extremely important. So if you want to have any chance at living longer than five minutes, stick with me." He nodded in affirmation, and Samus dashed out of the room.

The Master Chief turned on his heel, stomping back to his pod and retrieving his weapon: a standard issue MA5D assault rifle. He didn't think about it. It was simply instinct to have a weapon in his hands in a stressful situation. And, contrary to his outward appearance, inside he was in turmoil. In the last few minutes, he had woken from a three-century-long coma, had been almost shot and killed, was now about to fight his way through vicious bandits to escape the ship, with a bounty hunter of all people, and Cortana wasâ€¦

Cortana wasâ€¦

No. Don't think. Just do. Feel later. Feel when you have time.

But stillâ€¦ He stopped before the holographic pillar, pulling a small, empty data chip from its slot, pushing it into another in the back of his helmet. No voice sounded in his mind. There was no comforting, guiding presence.

He forced his mind blank, and followed Samus Aran, but could not fully suppress the heavy weight in his chest.

4. Chapter 4

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 4****

Reaching the top of the stairs, Samus collapsed into the morph ball and rolled quickly and silently to some improvised cover, a piece of caved-in roof. Her motion tracker registered four of the bandits on their way round the next corner. Discreetly preparing a missile, she looked around for her VIP charge. He was seemingly gone. Glancing around frantically, she heard the group of four's footsteps and idle chatter, forcing her into silence. She watched the tracker intently, waiting for the optimum momentâ€¦

Only for another blip to appear. Her eyes widened. It wasn't the same IFF as the bandits. It had to be him. It couldn't be anyone else.

She activated the X-ray visor, hoping he wasn't about to attempt what

she thought he was.

He was backed against a wall, out of the oncoming scavengers' view, gripping an ancient ballistic rifle. Oh, god, the idiot!

They approached, oblivious to his titanic presence, and rounded the corner into Samus' view. They wore mismatched pieces of armour, mostly taken from fallen foes. Samus recognised Space Pirate, Kriken and Federation Marine pieces, and briefly wondered how the suits managed to still be airtight despite their state.

The thought was soon dispelled, however. She put away the prepared missile, unable to be certain it would not kill her ally as well, and racked her brains for a solution. He was about to try and attack four heavily armed and armoured bandits with an, admittedly probably still functional, but completely obsolete weapon, and obsolete armour. She didn't trust her aim with a beam weapon at this range, so her only option was to get closer. She burst out of cover, sprinting towards the imminent firefight, but too late.

The Master Chief jumped from his own hiding spot, keeping low and firing off an automatic salvo, startling the enemy as well as impacting dead square in the chest of the first. They scattered and jumped back, but the bullets had no effect on the modern plating. As they drew from effective range, the surprise wearing off, the olive beast unclipped a small explosive from his belt, expertly bouncing it off a wall, the explosion eliciting a surprised, but not pained, cry from a bandit.

Another popped from cover, firing semiautomatic rounds of plasma at the Chief, only for them to meet empty space as the huge man rolled out of the way with astonishing agility. The attacker received the dregs of his opponent's magazine, all bouncing harmlessly off his full-face helmet, and popped back into cover instinctively. As the Chief himself went to reload, no doubt frustrated by his weapon's lack of effect, another bandit popped out of cover and fired a shot, grazing the his elbow.

His shields flared and dropped, throwing off a burst of golden particles, and he grunted with pain. A small scorch mark branded his plating, and he began to reload.

Idiot. Thought Samus, finally reaching effective range. The missile came back out, fired directly into the centre of the bandit's impromptu defences. There were piercing screams, and all motion on her tracker ceased. She looked over to the Master Chief, half in disdain, half in disbelief. As ever, he betrayed nothing. She settled for anger.

"What were you thinking? Your tech's hundreds of years old, it can't hold up to modern equipment!" The Chief said nothing, but looked away and shook his head slightly. Not in disagreement, but as if he was clearing thoughts from his mind.

A blip flickered on Samus' motion tracker. One of the bandits was still alive. Dammit.

The man was crawling away, muttering into a transceiver. The Power Suit automatically intercepted the signal, showing her his last words.

"Affirmative, we have contacts! An unknown fighter and Samus Ar-"

Samus put a shot in the back of his head. She turned around, and found the Master Chief regarding her handiwork. He moved quietly for his size. Fast, too. But that was never here nor there. His shields were down, and that meant that one more shot could ki-

Before her eyes, layers of golden energy began to form over the metal of her companion's armour, sparks flickering over their surface before all fading and disappearing. Noticing her surprise, Adam elaborated.

"Energy shields of that era could be recharged by portable fusion reactors in the midst of battle. He can take another shot or two now. You, howeverâ€¦"

Samus glanced at her own shields. Adam was right. They were critical, still not recovered from the multiple discharges and the Chief's admittedly justified assault. She was just as fragile as he was, perhaps even more so, as her armour would abandon her when it failed. She would have to fight conservatively.

"My shields are at critical levels now. So don't expect me to bail you out again, you hear me? There's three more of them on the way. Stay low."

Footsteps sounded from down the corridor. At the same instant, they took up places behind the corners. A somewhat shrill voice sounded over the radio.

"There, look! There's the bodies!" Another, gruffer one followed it.

"It's pretty soonâ€¦ They're still gonna be there. Probably just around that corner."

Samus admitted to herself that whoever this one was, he was smarter than the average bandit. Glancing to her side at this irony, she saw that the Master Chief had once again disappeared. How did she keep losing a seven-foot slab of metal?

Abandoning the train of thought in favour of the fight, Samus swung from behind cover, firing another missile. She caught a glimpse of two more mismatched soldiers like the preceding four, but also another, more physically imposing one, towering over them both. He held a large, bulky minigun, and unfortunately had good reactions.

"Ah!" He saw as he spotted Samus' projectile, raising the minigun. A spray of superhot blue plasma projectiles filled the air, accompanied by the barrage of his squadmates, and Samus' missile exploded in mid-flight before it could reach a target. Cursing, she leaned out of cover briefly to return fire, but couldn't avoid the shots; there were too many. Three impacted her, and her Suit screeched in alarm. The warning ENERGY SUPPLY AT CRITICAL LEVELS flashed before her eyes, and she gritted her teeth. This was not going to work. She was outgunned, the hall was too cramped to out-manoeuvre them, and overall, it seemed she was screwed.

Until she heard a muffled scream from down the corridor. The leader made a surprised noise, and fire in her direction ceased. She poked her head out, and to her surprise found the Master Chief engaging them in close quarters, having apparently snuck up from behind. One of them lay on the ground, blood leaking from a puncture in his armour's neck. The Chief had engaged the other grunt, attacking with a small grey combat knife. The only thing he had that was still effective. Maybe not so dumb after all.

Darting forward, he cannoned into the smaller man, who dropped his gun and fell to the floor. The leader swung his minigun to bear on the new attacker, revving up the huge weapon with considerable enthusiasm, only for a precise, quick and most importantly powerful kick to send it flying from his grasp. He stumbled as the weapon was effortlessly torn from his grip, turning his head back to his attacker with a face of amazed disbelief. He had no time to even blink before a metallic fist smashed into his face, his glassy visor instantly shattering. There was a sickening crunch as his skull caved in, and he flew back, slumped dead on the opposite wall. The Master Chief turned, where the incapacitated survivor was clawing towards his dropped weapon. Tossing his knife in the air to adjust his grip, the victorious titan threw his blade, which neatly impaled the side of the man's skull. His head crashed to the floor, and the Chief went to retrieve his knife. Samus came out from cover, regarding the man's handiwork. All three dead in less than thirty seconds without taking a single hit. A mix of terrain use, stealth and lethal hand-to-hand skills.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Having retrieved the knife, the Master Chief turned back to her. She was glad he couldn't see her smiling.

"Better?" He asked. She snorted in amusement.

"Better." She looked away from him, going back to the radio. "Adam, you are clear to engage."

"Affirmative. Make your way to the ship's damaged section, and I'll be there to pick you up." She nodded, and looked back to her escortee.

"We're leaving. Let's go."

She began walking, and the vibrations of heavy footfall behind her told her he was following.

They walked in silence, having nothing else to discuss. At one point, Samus got ever so slightly lost, and stalled, the Chief just carrying on straight past her in the right direction. That stung her a little, but in a funny way.

Eventually the artificial gravity began to lessen. Samus carried on regardless due to the gravity suit, and made sure to watch how the Chief was affected. For quite a while it seemed to have no effect on him, which was unusual. Either he had some tech that was uncharacteristically advanced, or he was just really heavy. After seeing what he had managed to do to the bandit leader with a single punch, she was prepared to believe the latter.

They carried on wordlessly, and Samus found herself using the silence to contemplate the man further. He was clearly extremely well-trained and experienced, his tactics and speed were a testament to that. Since it was a military vessel, he was probably a soldier of some kind, but no ordinary soldier caved in skulls with just a punch. His height and bulk, too—was he augmented? If so, it was very extensive. Maybe that was why he was valuable to the GF? A living testament to previous biological augmentation procedures? No, too obscure. That wasn't enough to earn her and Adam's way back in. But what then—?

They turned another corner, gravity growing stronger temporarily. They were on top of a generator. A huge panel of metal ceiling had fallen down, blocking the main part of the corridor. Glancing over it, Samus spotted a small hole. Just enough for the morph ball to fit through.

Stopping in front of it, she collapsed into the spherical form, earning a slightly curious glance from her companion. Her voice sounded in his helmet, and she rolled toward the tiny gap.

"Stay here. I'll get to the ship and bring back excavation tools." Disappearing through the hole, she popped out on the other side, straightening up. She took a few steps forward, and the floor rumbled. She spun round, and found the Master Chief lifting the huge panel with seemingly minimal effort. He stepped under, and allowed it to fall back into place.

"No need." He replied, resuming his walk. Samus stared after him for a second, then followed. He just got more and more impressive—

Unbeknownst to her, he was thinking the same thing.

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Eventually they reached zero gravity, both of them now forced to pull themselves along the walls. They rounded another corner, and the vast, glittering expanse of space stared down at them. Swiftly, the purple hulk of Samus' Galactic Federation-commissioned gunship shifted over them, blocking the starlight. Samus had never liked its colour.

The airlock opened, and both armoured warriors pushed off into the well-lit interior. As they passed through the doors, they collided slightly, dislodging both from their intended course. The Master Chief only slightly, however. Samus took this as further evidence for his weight.

They dropped to the floor under artificial gravity, metal boots clanking on the floor. The airlock pressurised, and they stepped into the ship's interior. It now seemed somewhat cramped, having been designed for one, and even in the event of more than one person, the second one was not expected to be Goliath.

Samus stepped over to the bridge, and Adam appeared over the console. The visitor recoiled visibly at the sight of the luminous blue figure, who removed his hat and saluted. He spoke quickly and stiffly, yet with great respect, something that Samus noted and

didn't like. It sounded like he was talking to a military superior.

"Greetings, Master Chief. I cannot express what an honour it is to meet you, truly. If I had a hand, I would shake yours. I understand you may be stressed or confused, and I offer you use of our extranet terminal to reacquaint yourself with the world." The huge man nodded.

"Thank you. And you are?"

"Adam Malkovich. Former human, now AI." Another nod. The Master Chief turned tail and stomped to the back of the cabin, the door opening to allow him passage, and closing behind him.

Both remaining occupants of the ship watched the door for a few more seconds. Adam broke the silence quietly, almost whispering.

"It's really himâ€|" He breathed. Samus gave him a look, removing her helmet and setting it down on the nearest available surface.

"Okay, enough of this. Tell me everything. Why were you being so polite?" Adam gave her a small smile.

"Samus, in our ship, at this very moment, is the most decorated military veteran of all time. He is also the most famous war hero in human history, and arguably the greatest soldier that has ever lived." Samus was taken aback. The man was clearly experienced, but to gain such high praise from Adam of all peopleâ€|" He laughed at her expression.

"I'm setting a course for Daiban. The council will be willing to listen to you in exchange for the return of this man."

"But why? What you just told me amounts to nothing!" The ship began to move, stars shifting on the main screen.

"Sit down, Samus." She did. "What I can tell you can't do the man justice. Better you see his service record when we arrive on Daiban." Samus frowned at him.

"Are you sure? You're gambling with our lives here, Adam."

"I can assure you, Samus, I'm really not."

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In the back of the ship, the Chief entered another room, this one a small cubicle with a single chair and table, topped by a computer screen. He sat down in the chair, it creaking in protest under his armour's weight. For the first time in over three hundred years, he took off his helmet, and ran rough, metal-plated fingers through his short fuzz of hair. The screen illuminated, casting light over his weary and worn face. A search engine appeared, as well as a holographic keyboard. His hands poised over it for a second, then slumped into his lap. He bowed his head, the weight of the last hour catching up to him. It hurt. God, it hurt.

He picked his helmet back up off the table, looking for a moment into the blank visor before turning it over and retrieving the chip

slotted into the back. Not completely empty. He pressed the only button, indicating for the single remaining file to play.

The familiar shape of his AI, his friend, Cortana appeared. Strings of code ran up and down her blue body, something she had once told him was something she had chosen in order to unnerve people.

She had a strange, mournful smile on her face, her eyes looking directly into his. It was just a recording, but still it seemed to pierce him. She was no more, but still remained

"Chief" He paused it. He couldn't. Not again. He couldn't just let go. All this, it seemed unreal, like a hallucination or a dream. Yet so vivid that it couldn't be. He had to understand it all.

Steeling himself, he hit the button again.

"If you are hearing this, I am dead. And you are alive." She smiled again, but her eyes were brimming with tears. He didn't cry. She did. In some ways, she had been more of a person than he was. "We always found a way to get out of everything, didn't we? Not this time, though." She looked at the floor, her hands clasp and unclasping nervously. "At least not me." He dropped his own head. He couldn't look her in the eye.

"So, I've made this message. To tell you the important things. Firstly you're better now. Faster, stronger, smarter, everything. I made some improvements in case you needed them. You'll need to rescue yourself from now on." A joke. The attempt didn't make either of them feel any better. He looked at his hand, clenching it into a fist, his armour creaking as it moved around him.

She gave a small sob, and carried on.

"Secondly why I did it. Why I killed myself. We weren't going to be found, John. Not for hundreds of years. And the battery couldn't sustain us that long. At least, not me. With me on, we'd be lucky to survive a decade. Without me hundreds of years." She looked up at him, and he looked back at her. "I was dying anyway, Chief. Rampancy. It happens to all of us eventually. We go mad, acting erratically, sparking off, causing damage I've had more than my fair share of time. If I had stayed on much longer, I would have killed us both." Her form flickered, turning red for a brief instant. She returned to normal, grimacing. "That was it now. Better me than both of us, Chief." He felt like crying. Why wasn't he crying? Why wasn't he like anyone else?!

As if she sensed his spike of anger, the message began to wind down to its conclusion.

"Finally One last thing before I leave you. Advice, or guidance. One last objective. One last waypoint." She smiled again, tears running down her face. "John When you get out Do what you want to do. Don't just go straight back into the military because that's what you feel you should do. You've done so much for humanity already. You never told me what you wanted after the war. I don't know if you even thought about it, just Don't be a machine. Fight for a reason. One that's yours, not one that ONI gives you, or Lord

Hood, orâ€| She trailed off, her fists balled at her sides, with pain or anger he didn't know. She was right, he realised. He never thought about what he wanted. He didn't want anything. He just did. She suddenly relaxed, letting out a breath. All too real.

"John, Iâ€| This was the worst part." He couldn'tâ€| He had to. "Iâ€| I love you. I don't know how, or if it's real, or if it's rampancy, butâ€| It's what I feel. Please John, just feel." She descended into sobbing, falling to her knees. He found himself leaning forward, wanting to help her up, help herâ€| anythingâ€| But it was too late.

She looked up at him, one last time, face streaked with tears and in immeasurable agony, but without regret. Unrepentant.

"Iâ€| Good luck, John. I know I made the right choice. Nowâ€| and when we met. Gâ€|goodbye."

Her image disappeared. He sat there in the dark cubicle, his head bowed, for some time. When he raised it, his face was expressionless, hard with focusless determination. He reached for the holographic keyboard, and began typing into the search engine. He was going to honour her final wish. He would find something to fight for. A reason of his own.

But first, he had to make sure he wasn't going to be shot in the back. What could he say? He was still a soldier. His fingers danced over the keyboard, inputting two words. A name.

Samus Aran

Absentmindedly watching the data stream, Adam noticed this first search. Inwardly, he smiled. The man was everything he expected.

5. Chapter 5

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 5****

Samus yawned and her eyes fluttered open. The familiar decor of her gunship's cockpit greeted her as she blinked the sleep from her eyes. She had somehow managed to fall asleep in the pilot seat, whilst still fully armoured. Her helmet sat on the bank of controls beside her, right next to a vaguely amused-looking Adam.

"Sleep well?" He enquired. She shifted in her seat. Her armour felt oddly uncomfortable.

"Well enough." She huffed. Stretching her limbs, she looked out of the cockpit at the void of stars in front of them. "Are we at Daiban yet?"

"We are indeed." The screen panned to the right, showing a slowly revolving blue planet beneath them. Ships buzzed to and fro in the lower orbits. Oddly, there were no security vessels come to arrest them. Either her planet-destroying career had garnered her significant respect from the Federation, or their standards had slipped recently. "They either haven't noticed us yet or are waiting to see what we'll do." Adam spoke her thoughts. "In any case, we have

a while."

Samus glanced over her shoulder at the door behind her.

"What of our friend over there, then? How's he doing?"

"He seems fine, although he hasn't slept. I can't say I blame him, but he seems quite adamant in learning all there is to know about our time." He gave Samus a look. "You know, the first thing he looked up was you." She smiled.

"I would have done the same. Professional." A light flashed on the console, and Adam looked down.

"He's getting up." Samus quickly donned her helmet, and waited for the door behind her to open. The Master Chief thudded in, boots clanking against the floor. Samus stood up and turned to greet him, whilst Adam took a formal stance.

"We are at Daiban?" He asked.

"Yes, we are." Confirmed Samus, voice modulator reengaged. The Chief glanced over the planet behind them, then looked back to Samus.

"I know who you are. Why do you hide your voice? And gender?" Samus raised an eyebrow under her visor. She disengaged her modulator, her usual voice now emerging.

"Sexism is seemingly eternal to some." The large man snorted softly.

"Then those 'some' leave themselves vulnerable." Adam gave a slight smirk at that, as did Samus. The Chief continued: "You are using me as a bargaining chip to erase your outlaw status, correct?" Samus winced a little at that. Still, it was true. Her charge was rightly curt and suspicious. To say she was infamous would be an understatement.

"Correct. Apparently you are quite valuable." The man's demeanour shifted, minutely more defensive. Perhaps that could have been worded better.

"In what wa-?" He began curtly, only to be cut off by a synthetic chirp from the console.

"Long-range hail." A fuzzy video feed appeared onscreen, depicting the GF emblem. A cybernetic voice crackled through.

"Samus Aran. You have been detected lingering in high orbit on a Federation planet. You are currently deemed a level-two threat to the system. State your purpose in our space, or leave. Else we will activate orbital defences." Samus stepped up to the console, and cleared her throat.

"I come bearing apologies and a peace offering to the Federation. I mean no harm." There was a short pause.

"Please state the nature of this offering."

"A lost war veteran, designate Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan-117

of the UNSC. I discovered him adrift on his ship in an asteroid field, cryogenically preserved." She glanced back at the man in question, who nodded. There was an even longer pause as the automated voice processed information.

"Offering confirmed and preliminarily accepted." It finally replied, eliciting no small amount of surprise from Samus and a knowing smile from Adam. "Prepare for threat-level determination scans." A brief second passed, and a wall of orange light passed through the room. It was not invasive, but thoroughly unsettling nonetheless. The voice spoke again. "Threat level minimal. Samus Aran, you are clear to land at docking bay BG-512. Upon exit, please remain unarmed, and report to the Council chambers with Sierra-117." The voice cut out and the channel closed. As,us removed her hand from the emergency jump controls and stepped back.

"That went far more smoothly than I expected." She nodded to Adam. "Take us in. Slowly." He nodded back and disappeared into the computer, and she turned back to the Chief. "They seem rather interested in you." He stared at her through both their visors. A tense silence quickly formed between them. They both knew the other was dangerous, and trust was expensive to them both.

"Yes." He answered shortly. She remained a second longer, then walked by him through the door to change.

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Mere minutes later, the gunship touched down in a hangar bay on the surface of Daiban. A casually-clothed and unarmed Samus teleported down to the ground, followed by the Master Chief, still in full armour. He glanced around. The hangar was light and airy, open on one side, with sheer light grey stone walls inlaid with decorative metal supports. It was filled with ships, but with few people walking around. It was certainly a far cry from the UNSC's dingy, metallic, (albeit much more practical) hangars. He'd once heard some marines talking about putting some oriental rugs into their area. That had been bewildering.

As he looked around, he noticed more, things only a soldier would. The metal decor in the floors and walls were elaborate disguises for concealed turrets and cover for infantry, ready for remote deployment at a moment's notice. There were large shield generators integrated into the edges of the bay doors. The layout of the docks were easily defensible. This had been designed with war in mind. The planet looked idyllic, but he could tell there was more going on, out on the fringes of their space.

He looked go Samus, who was tapping on a screen integrated into a pedestal, presumably checking in. He looked away, and had a sudden urge to reach for a weapon. Floating towards Samus was an all-too familiar shape. Coloured blue with pink tinged creeping over its bulbous body, an Engineer, or Huragok, was drifting through the air towards them. It looked slightly moist, waving its tendrils about as it floated, the many-eyed, mouthless, snakelike head darting about. He'd encountered these biological computers before a few times while fighting the Covenant. They had been unwilling servants, forced to repair and maintain equipment, produce shields for infantry and even suicide-bomb the enemy. One had once helped him, repairing his broken Needler, so he knew they were docile and friendly enough, but

indirectly very dangerous. This one was outfitted differently to its Covenant counterparts, the bomb-laden harness replaced with a simple brown toolbelt, holding a PDA, and various other pieces of equipment.

The Engineer (seemingly apt) reached Samus, who looked up and smiled coolly.

"Nice to see you again, Bob." The squidlike alien gestured with its tendrils, a small unit at the base of its long neck glowing. A voice emerged, only slightly synthetic.

"Likewise, Miss Aran. I thought I would not see you again for a very long time."

"Neither did I. Still, it's good to be back. I suppose I should be thanking you." She turned back to the Chief, raising an eyebrow. He took a step towards the pair, and Bob dipped his head, extending a tendril.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Bobs-On-The-Breeze. But please, call me Bob." He tentatively shook the alien's tentacle, silently reciprocating. Bob tilted his head, looking up to the golden visor. "And you... Is... Is that Mjolnir Mark VI Armour?" A nod.

"It is." The alien instantly jumped, bobbing excitedly. "Then you must be... By my own gas sac, it is an honour, Master Chief." Samus frowned.

"You too, Bob?" The Huragok turned to her, nodding.

"This man saved my species from subjugation, albeit probably without noticing. And not just my own. I believe there is also a decent-sized Ungoy cult dedicated to him." Samus gave the Chief a lingering look of appraisal.

"Seems you've had a rather decorated career."

"From you, that is a serious complement." Joked Bob. "If you wish, I would be happy to-"

"Samus Aran." The three turned to see a small squad of federation marines of various sizes and species, faces obscured by helmets. The leader stood before them, his weapon lowered, but the safety off. "The council requests your- and his- presence immediately." Samus nodded at Bob, who floated off with a quick 'goodbye'. She fell in line with the Marines, and the Chief followed, towering over them all.

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A quick transit later, they reached what the Chief presumed was the Council building, a tall, oddly shaped building consisting of a disc suspended by two tapering pillars. It was modern and plain, not ornate, but simplistically stylish. From the vast array of species the Chief had read about the previous night, as well as those he had seen on the way, he supposed there would be very little architectural overlap to create something that all cultures felt at home in. Best to just make it odd to start with.

They entered, firstly being scanned and ushered through a checkpoint, leaving the marines behind. No weapons were allowed into the Council chambers, hardly relevant when some of it's species were practically weaponised themselves.

A purple-skinned humanoid secretary disinterestedly guided them to the appropriate door, then left them to await summons. Samus was glad to see someone uninterested in the seven-foot fossil beside her. After a brief and ever so slightly awkward minute of waiting, the doors slowly slid open. A Grunt, or Unngoy, stood at the door, dressed in a miniature tuxedo, hands clasped together nervously and puffing out methane from a small unit on its side. It spoke in it's squeaky voice:

"P-please enter, M-miss Aran. Sir, you... Please w-wait here sir." He nodded and stared impassively at the small creature. It looked ready to faint on the spot, from fear or overwhelming excitement, it wasn't possible to tell. Possibly both.

Samus walked past it into the chamber, whereupon the Grunt bowed deeply and backed away, the doors closing behind it. The Master Chief stood patiently for some time, watching the door.

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"Miss Aran."

"Councillor."

"You have returned, it seems. Bearing gifts, no less."

"I have."

"And for that we are grateful. This man is a legend."

"So I've been told."

"If you don't know of his exploits, we'd be happy to provide his service record. I'm sure it's down in the archives somewhere. Some say it might rival your own. Nonetheless, with this act of goodwill, we no longer deem you an enemy. Hindsight has shown us that the X were not a wise choice for a bio-weapon. The corrupt faction within us that prompted the movement has been cauterised."

"Good to hear."

"Quite. Now, there is more to be discussed between you and us, but we would like to talk to the Master Chief first. Be sure to stick around. We will have transport arranged to take you to temporary living quarters in the meantime, once we have spoken with him."

"As you wish."

"We'll be in touch. Flipyap, please show him in."

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The door opened, and Samus walked out, accompanied by the Grunt usher. It bowed again, and held out an arm into the chamber. The

Chief looked up to Samus, who jerked her head at the door, face blank. He stepped in, the doors closing behind him.

The room was dimly lit and circular, giving the impression of an arena. He stood in a spotlight, on a circular platform, surrounded by stands filled with aliens. Each desk held a different species, presumably each race's representative, and they all watched him intently. He spotted a Drone, a Prophet, and so many more besides. There were dozens.

One stood up, and he turned to face it. Human. Old, perhaps seventy, with wispy white hair and a neat beard. He briefly dipped his head and spoke:

"Master Chief. It is an honour to meet you, and I am sure many among us feel the same." He took a brief scan of the Council's faces. From those he recognised the expressions of, he saw mixtures of wonder, curiosity and appraisal. He looked back to the human Councillor, and saluted.

Outside the chamber, watching a wall-mounted screen, Samus raised an eyebrow. She was pretty sure that salute hadn't been used in over a hundred years.

Witnessing a spate of confusion in the Council, the Chief returned to his normal posture, eyes darting over the many forms beneath his visor.

"If it's not too much trouble, would you mind removing your helmet?" The human councillor asked. A quick nod, then his hands went to his head, a soft hiss escaping as the pressurised helm came off.

His skin was pale and lined, from many years of warfare without seeing sunlight. His hair was cut close, little more than a brown fuzz on his scalp. His eyes were sunken, piercing steel blue irises gleaming from their depths. A faint smattering of faded freckles sat on his cheeks, remnants of a long-gone childhood. Biologically, he was not that old, but his life had taken its toll on him. His expression was unreadable, etched in stone. He clasped the helmet to his hip with one hand, and looked up to the council. The speaker smiled down at him. "Splendid. Now, I realise this must be confusing for you, having spent so much time asleep..."

"Aran allowed me use of her extranet terminal. I am well enough acquainted with the world."

"Ah, very well. Then I suppose that you are owed significant back pay, as well as a certificate or two. Being MIA that long must have broken some records..." The white-haired man attempted a joke. No one laughed. He cleared his throat and continued. "Well, in all seriousness this

Is quite an unconventional circumstance. We frankly have no idea how to handle this situation, so I suppose we shall defer to your wishes. I am afraid we cannot simply put you back on active duty, as your rank no longer exists. If you wish, you could retire..."

The Chief stiffened slightly, a movement noted only by Samus, outside.

"...But I believe you might find yourself too young for that. Your opportunities at this point are near infinite."

"Yes, Sir."

"Then I suppose you have a choice to make. Don't worry, we don't expect you to make it now. Simply mull it over. I trust it would not be too much trouble to complete a report? We're dying to hear your tale of survival, I assure you."

"No, sir. I would be glad."

"Good man. If possible, you should also complete a bio-medical test and a brief psyche exam. Also, you may want to have the armour removed. Our scientists should be able to help with that."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good. We have prepared accommodation for you in a nearby Federation base. There you will be able to take the tests and such. When you have reached a decision on what you wish to do, inform us and we will compile the necessary paperwork. Flipyap here will escort you there." A nod. "Well, if that is all, then I suppose we will hear from you soon. See you then, Master Chief."

Flipyap opened the door again, and the Chief left, taking a brief look back over the impassive, silent faces of this strange new world's rulers. He stepped through into the light.

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Samus looked away from the screen, which shut down, turning dark. Flipyap started off down the corridor, gesturing for them to follow. They fell in line behind the scampering dwarf, easily matching his speed. Samus looked up at the man beside her. He stared straight ahead, fingers curled around his helmet, almost possessively.

"You handled yourself pretty well in there."

"I used to know an admiral."

They continued walking in silence, eventually exiting the building, finding a taxi of sorts waiting for them. A man leant against it, holding a piece of card. Flipyap saw him and gulped. Nervously, he looked up at the huge man he had just "escorted", and shakily stuck out a hand. The Chief stared for a second, then reached out to gently shake it. Flipyap crooned, swaying as if he might faint, and staggered back into the building. The driver smiled good-naturedly after him.

"Weird little guys..." He looked at the card. "Alright, we'll be off then, Miss Aran, Mr... One hundred and seventeen?" He looked confusedly at the man and back down at the card before screwing it into a ball and stuffing it into a pocket. "Admin screwing with me again, probably." He shrugged, then opened the passenger door for the two, who clambered in, both having to duck considerably to fit.

The car took off, moving smoothly through the streets of the city. The Chief stared out of the window, neck bent over, helmet in his lap

as he observed the strange buildings and alien sunset shining a brilliant red off the glass sides of skyscrapers. He'd never stopped to look at things like that before.

As they drove, Samus gave the man further appraisal. He certainly looked like an old war hero, all right. Lacking in facial scars and sun exposure, yes, but the weary eyes and wrinkles said enough. She wondered how old he was, biologically, that is. He probably looked older than he was.

He stared blankly out of the window, watching the buildings fly by, expression still unreadable. Looking away from him, she glanced at a small data pad she had just retrieved from a pocket, checking for the service record she had been promised. 12% downloaded. She looked back up to the Chief, only to find him suddenly looking directly at her. There was a touch of irony to it. They held each other's gazes frostily for a moment, then turned to their individual windows. They didn't move for the rest of the drive.

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The chauffeur stopped, quickly hopping out of the now stilled vehicle, and opening the door. The two veterans stepped out, appraising the building before them. It was a huge dome of a building, large glass streaks across the surface serving as windows. The walls were a pearly white, smooth and matte. A small entrance graced the front, where a few individuals buzzed to and fro. The man handed both of his passengers a pass and a map, before tipping his hat and leaving. The two stood on the pavement for a moment. Finally, the Master Chief broke the silence.

"Mister One-hundred-and-seventeen?" He said, face showing a hint of an incredulous frown. Samus snorted and went inside, shortly followed by the Chief. They breezed through reception, the attendant looking at their individual styles of dress with slight disapproval. Past that point, Samus stopped to look at the Chief.

"I'm heading to my accommodation. You have jobs to do, so I suppose this is where we part ways." He nodded slowly, looking down at her.

"Be seeing you." He replied, before taking off down the corridor. She watched him walk away before getting into a nearby lift, taking out her tablet again. 96% downloaded. It'd be done by the time she reached her room. She was expecting a pretty damn good read for all the attention this guy was getting...

Back on the ground floor, the Chief ran through his jobs in his head. Turn in the armour. Get examined. See a shrink. He looked at the map, quickly pinpointing his destination and calculating the best route-

What was he doing? This wasn't a war zone. He was lapsing back into old habits, going through objectives and calculating possibilities. He growled under his breath as he walked down the empty hall, armoured feet rhythmically thudding along. He had been through decades of constant war, barely having time to recover from each fight's adrenaline rush before being chucked into cryogenic stasis and pulled out for the next fight. Just like a machine. She was... had been... right. Could he even live normally? If not, he was damn well going to

try. He wasn't going back into the military. Even as a commissioned officer, "The Captain" didn't quite have the same ring to it. But what else could he do? He had no qualifications, no experience with anything else other than war. He couldn't do anything else.

But he'd made a promise. What he'd do, he'd do because it was what he wanted. No more orders. No more autonomy. But for now...

Armour first. Then the tests. But they could wait. He needed a clear head now more than anything, and the best way to do that was some good, hard training. Clear his head with burning muscles and sweat. Keep the pain in his heart from resurfacing. Don't feel. Don't feel...

What he was training for, though, was anyone's guess.

6. Chapter 6

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 6****

"Well, sir, I think we've rigged up the system correctly now. Please step into the circle."

The Master Chief grunted, and complied. He stood in the Federation engineering deck, a concrete and steel room with countless tool-littered workbenches and looming machines, with a small, wiry man clad in white overalls. He had watched this technician tinker with the device in front of him for almost half an hour, and was losing patience.

He took hold of the two elevated handles on the inside of the ring, settling his boots into the shaped pads below. The ring rotated, tilting him back as robotic arms bearing numerous tools went to work removing his armour, unscrewing his arm-guards, detaching his greaves, until the olive plating lay in piles on the floor, only his helmet and metallic bodysuit remaining. The circle tilted back, and he stepped down, pulling off the helmet. He turned it over in his hands, staring into the reflective golden-orange of the visor.

He'd never really gotten attached to any of his suits. They were merely tools for him to utilise on the battlefield. Nothing more. But he didn't want to let it go. It seemed like the only thing he had left from his own world.

No.

Not the only thing.

He turned it back over and pulled out the AI chip, setting the helm down on a workbench. He took the pile of clothes the man had found for him and strode to the bathroom in the next room to change, nodding at the engineer as he left. A minute later, he returned, dressed in baggy cargo pants and a plain white vest. He held the folded under suit in one hand, clutching the chip tightly in the other. He set the suit down, and picked up his map, glancing and mumbling goodbye to the smaller man, who still hadn't moved from his position by the circle. He had an odd smile on his face.

"Be seeing you, then, Master Chief." The Chief grunted and left

again, glancing down at the map, closing the door to the room behind him.

The engineer waited a moment, then sprang onto the pile of armour with gusto. This was an opportunity not to be missed. Three-hundred year old battle tech! Still functional, too! A bit worn around the edges, sure, but perfectly intact! Simply fascinating. He rummaged through the pile, dragging the heavy pieces into some semblance of an ordered system. He looked at the chest plate, gazing at the redundant, yet intricate, electronics with an odd reverence. Plucking a tool from his belt, he began carefully pulling out components, one by one. He held them to the light, scanned them, searched up what they were if he had no clue, even pocketing one or two as keepsakes.

Geek heaven, he thought with a grin.

He pulled out what seemed to be a memory card, a thin black box that barely fit in his palm. Turning it over, it's purpose became clear. The words: 'DATA STORAGE' had been boldly printed onto the surface. He fingered the access port with interest. If memory served correctly, this was still a supported format!

His curiosity piqued, he took it over to a computer on the other side of the room, rummaging briefly for the right adapter before plugging the drive in. The files popped up on the screen, a small icon indicating that they were being converted into a modern code language. The techie pulled up a chair and sat down, wondering what files would be on the drive. Probably video footage of battles. Or captured enemy intel. Awesome. The icon disappeared, and the speakers gave a small pinging noise. He clicked on the first file he saw, opening up a screen of text. As he read, his eyes grew wide. Was this...? He opened another one. Wider still. Another. He broke out into a mad grin.

Fumbling at his belt for his phone, he tapped in a number with shaking hands, still smiling like a madman. "Hey, Miranda, is that you? Listen, you need to get down to engineering ASAP. And bring a compilation AI with you. No! Just do it, okay? This is huge...! Okay, right, see you in a minute, believe me, this is incredible." He terminated the call, looking back to the screen, reading it again, his grin growing ever wider.

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On the other side of the building, the Chief looked up from his map. A holographic signpost announced in big letters that he was at the Training Centre. Perfect. Pocketing the map, he stepped towards the double doors, which slid open automatically.

The room was impressively large, encompassing about the area of a football pitch. Machines of every shape and size filled half the room, some recognisable, others not. The other half was taken up by a large open area, the floor composed of padded mats, presumably for sparring purposes. Whilst the machines were wholly unoccupied at the moment, a group of half a dozen figures of all sorts of shapes and sizes were standing on the mats, five lined up before the other, who had its back to him. They were all dressed in some sort of loose military training clothes, much like he was. They were standing to attention in the Federation salute, seemingly going through

drills.

Upon closer inspection, their species became apparent. There was one human among them, a young woman with a face like thunder and likely an attitude to match, considering the looks she was throwing around. Next to her stood the lean frame of a pale-skinned Sangheili, standing straight and oddly still, his only movement being the occasional flex of his mandibles. The next along was another Grunt, shuffling and twitching impatiently, but managing to stay stood to attention nonetheless. Juxtaposing him were the next two, a pair of towering masses of bright orange worms, rumbling quietly to themselves. It took a moment to realise that these were Hunters, or Mgalekgolo, without their armoured plating. A pair of "bond brothers" that had not been forced to don metal carapaces and march into war. They seemed to have chosen that of their own free will. The last in the line was a species that he would not have initially recognised, were it not for his night of relentless study. It was a Vhazon, a purple insectoid on two spindly, back-bending legs. It's torso was more sturdy, rounded and naturally armoured, with a domed head and softly glowing blue eyes. From what he'd read, they were zealously moral, making them born peacekeepers. This one carried itself with a regal grace, bordering on arrogance, but seemed respectful enough to the final figure standing before it and the other four. This last one was facing away from the Chief, but seemed humanoid in shape, roughly eight feet tall with a bulky, muscular frame. Matted brown fur covered its body, what seemed to be some kind of harness poking out from the tufts.

His silent inspection did not go unnoticed, the human woman catching sight of him, glancing in his direction. The two Hunters quickly followed, both turning to him simultaneously, their many beady green eyes unblinking. The rest quickly followed, causing the final creature to turn. Suddenly, it was very familiar.

A Brute, or Jiralhanae. He'd killed countless numbers of them while fighting against the Covenant. As it turned, its flattened face and protruding teeth came into view, looking with an expression that the Chief had never seen before on his kind: good-natured curiosity. There seemed to be no ferocity in its demeanour, which was frankly quite unsettling.

"Who's this then?" It rumbled. "I don't recognise you, sir. Come closer, perhaps you would wish to join us in training?" It seemed amicable enough. He considered the Brute's words briefly before complying. Having someone to train with would likely be quite productive.

He walked over, the five lined up before them observing him silently. The Brute stuck out a hand, pulling him into a vicelike handshake as he took it. "Sergeant Titus, enlightened Brute, at your service." He grinned. "Good to meet you, Mr...?"

"Ex-Master Chief, John-117."

Titus recoiled, reeling as his eyes widened, scanning over the man. Emotions shone in his eyes, but whether they were fearful or merely shocked, he couldn't tell.

"You... What? No... You're joking, aren't you? Oh, dear, you had me there. You humans crack me up!" He started laughing, a deep, booming

sound, only to stop when he noticed the man's expression. "Ha... Wait. You're... Serio-?" He was cut off by a buzzing from a band around his arm. The held it up, a small screen blinking into life on the surface of the band. The screen showed a news bulletin emblazoned with a Federation emblem. He scanned the brief chunk of text, eyes widening again. He looked from the screen to the Chief, then back again. A small gasp escaped his mouth.

Instantly, he sank to his knees, head bowed, one fist pressed to the floor. "Sir, it is an incredible honour to meet a warrior so mighty. I am in awe." He looked sideways to the standing trainees, all standing in varying degrees of shock, surprise or disbelief. Titus snarled at them, straightening up. This was the side of a Brute he was more familiar with.

"Is this how you treat a returning war hero?!" He roared, pulling himself back up to full height, teeth bared. "Show some respect, Marines!" Their stances snapped back into shape, stiff and practised. Titus grunted in satisfaction. He was definitely excellent Sergeant material, you had to give him that. "Sorry about my squad, Sir, they have no respect!" He glared over them.

"You don't have to call me Sir. My rank doesn't exist any more." The Chief said. Titus smiled at him.

"You'll always be the Master Chief, Sir, whether it's a rank or not. Any true soldier will tell you that." The Chief winced inwardly at the connotations of his words, but continued on.

"Introduce us, then?" He nodded at the Marines. Titus nodded, grinning euphorically. He looked like a child meeting his hero. A large, hairy, simian child, that is, but the point stood.

"Of course, sir." He began to walk down the line, introducing each soldier in turn. First, the woman. She was considerably shorter than the two of them, but stared up defiantly. "Private Natalie Palmer, our CQC specialist." Titus said. "Handy with knives. Pity they could never be as sharp as her tongue is." She glared up at her Sergeant, and he glared back.

They moved on to the Elite, who appeared as if he was barely restraining himself from sudden action. "Corporal John Vadam, our sniper." The Brute grinned at the other alien, seemingly knowing something that the others didn't. "Go on, then, Corporal, you've been waiting your whole life for this." The Chief raised an eyebrow, then contemplated the name a second longer. Something clicked.

"I knew a Vadam. The Arbiter." The Sangheili relaxed, yet still appeared nervous.

"Yes, sir. My ancestor. Since him, every first-hatched male of our line has been named after you, myself included." The Chief nodded.

"An honour." He replied. The alien practically beamed at that, standing tall with confidence. Titus moved to the Grunt, diminutive among the rest. He looked slightly ridiculous in the salute, sweating and hunched.

"Private Malab, our Recon and Infiltration unit. Despite how he

looks, he can be practically invisible when he wants to be. Gets a bit overzealous with the remote detonation packages, though, don't you?"

"Sir, yes, Sir!" Malab squeaked excitedly. "Proud of it, Sir!" Titus snorted, looking to the two Mgalekgolo.

"These two are Lance Corporals Zarru and Horru." He smiled. "Demolitions." The first of the twins rumbled in response, his brother joining in shortly after. "They don't like translators, for some reason. But they listen, and that's the important thing." He turned to the Vhozon, who regarded them coolly.

"And Corporal Vaxus. Our Engineer, and Sapper." The alien bowed its domed head, speaking in a deep, even tone.

"It is an honour to meet such a legendary peacekeeper." The Chief nodded back. It seemed that they were both predisposed to silence. Titus grunted.

"Decent enough squad, I suppose, but they lack discipline!" The soldiers didn't even flinch at the outburst. They were used to it. "I was about to put them through some training. Whip them into shape a little!"

"I'll join in."

"Of course, sir! Now, how shall we do this? We're a bit limited, unfortunately, what with so many species. The only exercise we could all really do is the combat sim."

"Sounds good to me." He could use a good fight.

"Right then Sir! Over here!" Titus marched over to the wall of the room, where a long metal unit stood. Cuboid in shape, several open booths protruded from the side of the steely box, each of a different size. The glass doors showed off a variety of glowing circuits and instruments, a small holographic control panel by each one. Hanging over it was a large monitor, currently dark, inactive. Titus pressed his palm to a small panel on the edge, and the machine flared into life. He turned, grinning.

"Right then, you dirty Mikey Foxtrots, you know the drill! In you get!" The marines briefly glanced at one another, then stepped over to the unit. They tapped a few buttons on their respective consoles, then stepped into the booths. They turned and shut their eyes, resting their limbs on several specially-placed pegs, and went limp. Titus examined read outs on the edge of the monitor, nodding to himself. "Right, they're all in the simulation now. So, Sir, what do we start with?"

"Unarmed combat." The ape smiled.

"My favourite, Sir. Just let me set you up here..." He tapped on the keyboard of an appropriately-sized booth. "Let's see... Ah, yes! Looks like Garry came through with those calibrations! Set to human... And... Done. Ready for you, Sir. Just step inside." The Chief nodded at the friendly hulk, and stepped up into the unit, doors closing behind him as he got into position.

Suddenly, his vision darkened, limbs immediately going numb. It was somewhat of a shock, but his vision soon returned, showing him an altogether different environment. A strange, blank environment, the only feature being the floor, a dark surface, crisscrossed by blue lines. Where his feet touched the ground, a light halo appeared around them, highlighting them. He took one foot off the ground, seeing the colour linger, then disappear. A stealth hindrance. He looked over to the other combatants, spread around the blank space. They were glancing at each other, not sure of the rules yet.

A large, floating screen appeared in the air, showing Titus' face, grinning. "Right! Unarmed combat, maggots! You ready to kick their asses, Sir?" The Chief surveyed the squad. They were evidently well-trained, and he might be a little rusty, but they all looked quite young. Age wasn't a limiting factor for him.

"If I can. One versus all." He cracked a smile. This was his element. He'd been playing this game even before he was a Spartan. And he always won. Titus watched him, eyes wide, like an enraptured schoolboy.

"Alright, squad." He spoke, not shouting this time. "One versus all. To the death. Try not to make fools of yourselves." The screen disappeared, replaced by a large holographic '3'.

The soldiers jumped into stances, each one different. The Chief cracked his neck, swinging his arms.

The three became a two.

The soldiers closed in, surrounding their enemy, circling slowly. The Chief took a deep breath, tensing and untensing muscles.

One.

They drew back, legs ready to jump into combat, but with a certain amount of hesitancy. Legends spoke for themselves.

Zero.

They charged. Two old blue eyes flashed, and the man was a blur.

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The door slid open, and Samus walked into her room. It was plain, but still reasonably comprehensive. The main room in itself held a surprising array of features, from a kitchenette to a dining table. A few doors split off from the central one, she could see a bed through one, a bathroom through another, and the last was closed. For now, she didn't really care. She walked straight into the bedroom and lay down on the double bed, pulling out the small tablet and opening the freshly-downloaded document. Now she could find out what all the fuss was about.

She flicked past the Federation header, filled with numbers, dates, collaborator's and compiler's names, doing the same for the database port notes. Finally, she stopped at the UNSC header, preserved from the original document. Directly under it was a lot of warnings, including a very large CLASSIFIED watermark and several 'ONI' logos.

It had been a pretty exclusive paper in its time. Finally, it showed a name. John-117. Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. Apparently, no last name. It would probably get to that later.

Scrolling down a little further showed a list of commendations and awards. A very long list. Apparently every medal that had existed at the time, bar one, according to a GF footnote. After that, a list of battles and operations he had participated in. She only recognised a few, so she went past it with just a glance. Next was the meat of the matter, the biography. You had to be important to get one of these, and not just a high rank, either. She got comfortable and started to read.

MCPO John-117 was born in 2511, in Elysium City, on the colony world of Eridanus II. At the age of six, he was conscripted into the SPARTAN-II program under the recommendation of Dr Catherine Halsey, being replaced by a flash clone that would later die of natural causes. He was relocated to the planet Reach, where he trained under CPO Franklin Mendez with the other child conscripts, eventually receiving the project's landmark augmentations, being one of only thirty three out of seventy five who survived unharmed. This gave him superhuman reflexes, markedly improved muscular strength, nigh unbreakable bones and virtual night vision. Later on, he received MJOLNIR MK IV, V and VI sets of armour, each exponentially boosting his abilities in turn. His first major military operation came in...

Samus stopped reading, placing the tablet down by her side. She felt a certain empathy with the man now. His story was not so dissimilar from her own. Both trained from youth, both augmented, both slightly reclusive, from the look of the rest of the record. The report undoubtedly didn't do his experience justice. Her own certainly didn't. And now he was stranded in a strange future, surrounded by a lot of political bullshit that probably wouldn't work out well for him.

"You look grim." Came a voice from nowhere. She jumped, lancing to her side. A small hologram of Adam stood on the bedside table, the alarm clock apparently projecting him. She gave him a glare, then sighed.

"Maybe a little."

"Is it about the Master Chief?"

"Yes. I feel... A bit guilty, for throwing him in at the deep end for our own gain."

"That is indeed true. But he may not have survived much longer had we not found him."

"I get that. Still..."

"What exactly can we do?" Samus paused.

"We could help him along. You saw how he was with the Council he doesn't want to retire. But he probably wants to keep his soul too, and you know what the GF does to officers." Adam raised an eyebrow, but replied anyway.

"What suggestion could we make, then?" She paused again, this time for longer.

"...Maybe bounty hunting?" The hologram considered it.

"That might actually suit him. We should tell him that." Samus felt a small knot of wariness form in her stomach. She'd just blurted the idea out.

"Then again, it's not for everyone." She tried. "I mean, he's good, yes, but could he hold up now?" Adam smiled.

"During his night studying, he memorised the exact function and various applications of no less than twelve of the most common modern firearms in GF-controlled space. He also brushed up on military tactics, researched various different starship armaments and FTL technologies, and found the most effective methods of piercing most types of shields and body armour with knives, kinetic weapons and plasma." His smile got a bit wider. "I'd say he's up to speed."

Samus laughed a little. Dedication was one thing that had served her well as a huntress. And Johnnie here seemed to have it in spades. She noticed Adam move, his head flicking to the side. She watched his eyebrows go up, and he turned to her. "You'll probably want to see this. He's down in the Training Gym, beating the living daylights out of Kilo Squad." Kilo Squad was a highly respected unit. Young, but very experienced. Adam was right, she did want to see this.

"No remote access to the sim feed, I'm afraid, better get moving." He said, hologram disappearing. Samus lingered for a moment, then jumped up and dashed out of the room. A fight was a fight. And this was set to be one for the ages...

Ah, you know what, screw it. I'll just post the author's note here. It's more convenient for you lot that way. Plus, I guess it is a bit odd to review your own story, even just for an A/N.

Anyway, yes, here you go. I can't tell you how long I've been waiting to write the fight scene in the next chapter. I have a theme song and everything. This one might have been a little slow, but I've yet to get into the swing of things. In fact, it doesn't really start until Part 2 of the trilogy. Sorry.

**Now, for a few shout-outs! **

**the rakiat: Sorry about not getting back to you. It's hard for guests. :(Still, thats an intriguing idea if I ever saw one. I'll see what I can do with the plot I have cooked up.
;)**

Prometheus-G747: This story doesn't deserve to be thought about as much as you have done. But thank you anyway. It's a great complement. Thank you. :)

Un Known: You intrigue me, Mr Known... I hope I shall see you again... *strokes white cat and adjusts eyepatch like a stereotypical villain* :)

**Anonymous: You're definitely right about them having similar

stories. Hope you saw the little nod I made there. But I will be capitalising on their differences to develop their friendship. Hope you enjoy the ride!**

**Oh, and also, anyone who successfully spots the hidden Mass Effect reference gets a free digital waffle next chapter. See you then!
**

7. Chapter 7

Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 7

Word had already gotten around by the time Samus reached the Gym. A small crowd of various species and professions had gathered round the sim unit, all watching the currently blank screen above the boxy unit. An undercurrent of excitement flowed through the crowd, the air almost electric. Samus gently manoeuvred her way to the front, seeing the unit's operator, Titus, tapping away at the controls. She glanced at his shoulder, where his sergeant's stripes were displayed.

"Sergeant." She turned to her, inhaling sharply as he saw her. Two legends in one day? Oh, too good to be true.

"Ah- Samus Aran, Ma'am!" He quickly saluted, smiling down at her. "An honour to meet you, Ma'am. Sergeant Titus. I take it you're here for the show, like this lot?"

"You could say that."

"It's a great one, Ma'am, it really is. The Chief's kicked my squad's arse all at once three times now, and he's getting faster every time." Samus raised an eyebrow. She did want to see this. He might be bounty hunter material after all.

"Exciting." She feigned disinterest. Best to keep it cool.

"Yes it is, Ma'am. I've dreamt of seeing the Master Chief fight since I was a whelp. And he hasn't even picked up a gun yet! I'm just tweaking the friction of the ground a little, then they'll be at it again." Samus didn't reply to this one, instead studying the bodies lying limp behind the glass. Kilo squad looked visibly tired, their skins slightly sweaty from the simulated exertion. The last occupied booth held the Chief, or John. He didn't look tired at all. In fact, there was a trace of a smile evident on his face. Interesting.

Titus pushed the Enter key, and leant back from the panel. "Alright, Kilo, get it together! You've got an audience now! Including the illustrious Miss Samus Aran! So try not to die in less than five minutes this time!" He growled into a small camera. He pushed another button, and the screen sparked to life, showing the arena and six combatants. The countdown appeared, and the camera panned down, a small AI taking care of the cinematography. It showed the exhausted-looking Kilo team, and the cold smile of the Chief. A few more dramatic swoops went on as the numbers dropped, and Samus found herself focussing intently on the fight. Time for a real test of character for this so-called Legend...

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Natalie Palmer cried out as a sledgehammer blow caught her across the face, flinging her to the side, a painful crunch sounding as something in her neck compressed in a way that it wasn't meant to. She collapsed to the floor, spitting blood and gritting her teeth. She was not going down again.

She struck up with a kick, meeting nothing but empty air as vicelike hands grabbed her leg, swinging her through the air. She slammed into her teammate, the Elite John'Vadam. They both crumpled, winded, and tried to push themselves up. She noticed that he had a mandible bent oddly, clearly worse for wear. He got up first, pulling her to her feet as they both jumped back into the fight.

The Chief fought brutally. Every movement was economical, precise, and smooth. Every hit, pinpoint accurate and brimming with power. Even now, as they ran back into the fight, they saw him executing Zarru, ripping worms from its body, then snapping its calcified spine with a snap kick. Horru lay nearby on the ground, the victim of a similar treatment. Vaxus was also down, a hole punched in his cracked carapace.

The Corporal reached the Chief first, swinging a roundhouse punch with deadly precision. The Chief blocked it effortlessly, slamming it downwards with both arms, following up with a crushing elbow to the chest. The Elite staggered back, clearing enough space for the Chief to hook his leg, sweeping it from under him. He fell to the floor, landing with a thump, a swift curb stomp to the neck ending his resistance.

Natalie gritted her teeth and swung at the man, hoping to at least land a blow. Were it so easy. A hand ghosted past hers, guiding the punch away. She turned, off balance, and a blow to the back of her leg brought her to her knees. Strong hands closed around her neck and chin. She heard a snap.

Instantly, she burst back into reality, gasping for air. She scowled at the crowd through the glass. Beaten again!

A large, hairy face appeared in her view. Titus.

"_One hundred and seventy-two seconds!_" He yelled, voice muffled ever so slightly by the glass. "_Pathetic!_" She snorted. He was actually enjoying this. No surprise, really. Most Jiralhanae still lived on Doisac, gladly reverting to their old tribal ways after the fall of the Covenant. A few, the more intelligent ones, salvaged old distress beacons and now lived with the rest of the galactic community. They called themselves the enlightened Brutes. They were still bloodthirsty buggers, though.

She looked at the audience they'd garnered, and groaned. This would definitely be a hit to their reputation. And Samus Aran, as well! This was just horrible. She felt like she was a kid getting zeroes on test after test after test, all the while the headmaster was leaning over her shoulder.

"Okay! Next round!" Urgh. And again... This was going to be a rough day...

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Crunch.

This was the most fun he had had in ages.

Snap.

Enemies that came back from the dead, learning and adapting. He hadn't used the same move twice, just in case they caught on. And it was so easy!

Slam.

Whatever had been done to him, it had worked. He had never been this fast, this strong, outside of his armour. Kilo squad was very good, yes. Just not in his league.

Wave after wave, Kilo Squad fell over and over, each time murdered with brutal efficiency in almost every conceivable way. Samus watched with considerable interest. Besting two hunters with your bare hands was an impressive enough feat, but add a Vhazon, a Sangheili and a human to boot, all highly trained and working together... It was definitely going to be one for the books around here. She could see people in the crowd downloading the live video stream already. She turned her attention back to the screen.

The Chief had pinned John'Vadam's arm behind his back, a position that the Elite could not pull out of. He cranked it further, the joint popping and causing the reptilian soldier to hiss in pain. He followed with a blow to the back of the head, breaking his spine and sending the body tumbling, just in time to dodge the wild swing of Horru's arm. He rolled away, putting distance between him and the titanic creature, only to spot Vaxus whirring towards him as a Vhosphere, a folded, spinning form with deadly extending scythes.

Using his momentum, he slid under the blades, pivoting and kicking the spinning top's balance out from under it once he was clear. Horru charged again. Thinking quickly, the Chief grabbed Vaxus, and swung him in a perfect curve, his bodily blades embedding deep into Horru's chest. The sentient mass of worms gurgled and fell, crushing Vaxus's body under his weight.

They were all dead. Again. The Chief rolled his shoulders, no trace of a gloating smile on his features, just getting ready for the next round.

Samus watched him for a moment, on the screen and through the glass, his body twitching slightly. Okay, he could definitely handle himself in hand to hand combat. Enough of that. Time to even the odds.

She sauntered up to Titus, who was busy taunting his soldiers, and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned, and stood to attention.

"What can I do for you, Ma'am?" He barked. She glanced at the weary-looking squad behind the glass.

"How about we even the odds a little?"

"In what way, Ma'am?"

"Arm everyone." The Brute's eyes opened wider, and he seemed contemplative for a moment. Then he grinned.

"You're right, Ma'am. As much as I love seeing this, it is still training, and that is what we need to train the most." She nodded, and he tapped a few buttons on the panel, barking into the intercom as he remodelled the simulation. "Alright, you miserable lot! Time to change things up! Standard issue firearms for everyone!" He navigated a few more menus, selecting the weapons. Another menu, and the arena changed, several large metal shipping crates materialising around the area, functioning as cover.

Kilo Squad logged back in on one side of the arena, appearing with rifles of varying shapes and sizes. They began to check safeties and sights. On the other side, a single pistol dropped at the Chief's feet. He had heard Titus' announcement, and knowing that Samus was here now, it was probably her doing. He doubted a Brute, no matter how civilised, would prefer watching a gunfight to a fistfight.

He picked up the pistol, turning it over in his hands, recalling his research. It was an XE-21 Heavy Plasma Bolt Pistol. Semi-automatic. Accurate enough for most mid-range combat scenarios. A battery powerful enough to fire 10,000 rounds before requiring a recharge. He pressed a button on the side, and the weapon gave a short whine, small blue lights lighting up on the metallic polymer surface. An electronic overheat gauge turned on, and he fired off a single round at the floor, testing the kick and heat retention. Satisfied, he grasped it firmly in his right and waited for the countdown.

3... 2... 1... Zero!

Kilo Squad assembled behind a crate, covering all their flanks as they slowly crept around the arena.

They each clutched their weapons, a particle-acceleration sniper rifle in John'Vadam's hands, a simple knife and bolt pistol for Natalie, plasma shotguns for Malab and Vaxus, and two heavy assault cannons integrated into the Lekgolo brothers' arms. The team swept over the arena, combing it thoroughly for their enemy. This went on for five whole minutes, all the while oblivious to the fact that he was watching from above.

The Master Chief had clambered on top of a crate. A gun battle against that many opponents in an environment like this was suicide. He would be surrounded in seconds, and then completely at the mercy of their superior weaponry. A pistol against two heavy anti-armour weapons? Really? The brute certainly thought highly of him.

Well, he couldn't let him down...

He waited, motionless, until they passed by his hiding spot. They were thinking two-dimensionally. Not one of them saw him coming. As silently as he could, he reached down and grabbed Vaxus, who was bringing up the rear. Giving a quiet grunt at lifting the insectoid's unexpected weight from such an awkward position, he hauled him up, clamped a single hand over his mouth, and shot him in the head.

Below, the team jumped out of their skin.

"He's on top of the crate!" With as much speed as he could muster, the Chief tucked his pistol into his belt, and snatched up the Vhozon's shotgun, hopping down from the crate just before the two Hunters flipped it over. He scrambled for cover, a sniper beam zipping past his head as he did so, and took off, firing behind him to cover his escape.

Cursing, the remaining members of Kilo ran after him, firing wildly in his wake. The Chief veered off to one side, and a quick order from Vadam split the squad, ready to surround him. They each took a different path, converging on the sound of heavy footsteps.

Popping out of cover, Vadam was met with a plasma blast, his flesh seared by intense heat, and his rifle quickly stolen. Hearing the shot, Horru veered around his corner, charging a shot on his cannon. He fired on sight, a huge ball of superheated blue gas roaring through the air. His target dove away, equipment rattling awkwardly as he narrowly escaped the resulting explosion, leaving with only singed hair.

Horru followed him, and Zarru stepped in from the next junction, cutting off his escape. Gritting his teeth, he shouldered the rifle he had acquired, firing a shot into the Hunter's leg. It roared and stumbled, giving him the opening he needed to slip around the teeming hulk's body.

A knife cut through the air towards him, a lightning fast strike he only just managed to dodge. Following up, Natalie threw a roundhouse kick at him, which she managed to connect. He grunted, but did not pause. He whacked her with the butt of his rifle, causing her to stumble, and quickly drew his pistol, firing three quick rounds into her chest. She fell down, and the Chief made sure to grab her weapons, accidentally dropping his rifle when Malab jump-attacked from above, part of the grunt's surprise shotgun blast grazing his shoulder. Searing, white-hot pain spread over the area, and he cringed, holding back a cry, even as a chunk of his shoulder was vapourised. He brought the knife down, stabbing into Malab's skull, his other hand completely out of action. He left the knife in its victim's head, and ran, the two Hunters not far behind. Hot blood flowed freely down his arm, staining his shirt crimson, but he ran on, clutching his one remaining weapon, the pistol, in his good hand.

Now his brain began to work in overdrive. All targets eliminated besides two heavy units. Current ordnance insufficient. Requisition of new ordnance risky, low chance of success. How to neutralise? Close range combat dangerous, but eliminates danger of heavy weapons. Stealth approach already used. Will likely be ineffective. Friendly fire? Unlikely to occur. Sabotage?

He racked his brain for the few brief glimpses of the weapon that he had managed to see. Sleek, white design... Heat vents... Exposed power cells. Meant to be covered by the user's shielding. Vulnerable.

He'd only have one shot at this.

But one shot was all he needed.

He stopped in his tireless run, skidding to a halt in the narrow corridor between two of the identical crates. He turned. The pair rounded a corner, barely ten meters away. He raised his gun, and the Hunters did the same. The Master Chief took a deep breath, and time slowed. He saw the blasts charging in the barrels of the two cannons, he saw the painstaking twitching of the worms that made up his enemies. The glowing power cells on the side of each weapon, barely a sliver of light from his angle.

He closed one eye. Took careful aim.

Two shots rang out. The Lekgolo barely registered the slight impact.

The two plasma cannons stopped charging, now beginning to whine a much higher note. The twins shook their weapons, warbling uncertainly as the noise became louder and louder. A jet of scalding gas rushed from one of the ruptured cells, making them both recoil. The whine became louder still, and warning lights began to flash on the weapons' surfaces, a brightening blue light shining from the barrels. The brothers roared, tried to let go of the failing weapons. No use.

They looked over to the Chief, who had dropped his pistol, pressing the hand to his wound.

"Good fight, soldiers." He half-grimaced, half-smiled.

The two didn't even have time to react. A tiny blue sun erupted from their arms, engulfing the two completely in white-hot plasma, instantly vaporising them and blowing the surrounding crates away. Even through closed eyes and a shielding arm, the victorious Chief could see the blinding light, the scalding wind singing his skin.

He let out a breath. Victory, absolute. With quite a bit more injury than he was used to, but still.

He tentatively removed his hand from the wound, adrenaline no longer numbing the pain. It was very bad. He could see bone, and blood oozed from what was left of the muscle that had been there. He couldn't move his arm at all.

He suddenly heard clapping. He looked up, seeing the face of Samus Aran on the monitor. She was making the noise.

"Not bad, Johnnie, not bad at all." He frowned a little. How had she found out his name? Had she... Never mind.

"Thank you." He replied curtly. He saw her eyes flicker over his wound. She gave him another of her smiles, a closed-mouth, slightly predatory smirk that gave you the impression that someone else was holding all the cards.

"Let me fix that for you." She said, glancing down and moving her arm on a screen that John couldn't see. Instantly, his flesh reappeared, fully healed, the pain abruptly evaporating. He flexed the muscle. Good as new. He grunted in appreciation, then looked back up again. She was still smiling.

"What next?" He asked. Her smile grew fractionally wider.

"Titus got a bit bored of watching." Around him, the terrain changed, the crates disappearing, being replaced by more open surroundings, several concrete blockades scattered around as cover. "You might want to grab a weapon."

No sooner had she said it, Titus materialised. He was a glorious sight, standing proudly to his full height, wearing full gleaming white and blue battle armour, a shotgun trapped to his thigh and a huge hammer clipped to his back. The unarmed, unarmoured Chief stopped and stared for a split second. This was going to hurt.

Samus remained on the monitor, looking thoroughly interested by the situation. Titus grinned at the Chief, before looking up and speaking into the empty air.

"Alright, Kilo, you worthless excuses for soldiers! Place your bets now! How long am I going to last? Twenty mile run in the morning if any one of you say less than a minute, as you are insulting both me, and the engineers who made this gear!" He rapped on his metal-plated chest. "The same punishment applies to anyone who says over ten minutes, as you are insulting the Master Chief!" He bellowed.

The Chief swallowed. Perhaps the brute thought too highly of him. These were very tall odds indeed. He scooped up the pistol lying at his feet. It wasn't exactly comforting.

The Brute drew his hammer, little blue LEDs lighting up all over it. It bore an indistinguishable similarity to gravity hammers he had seen before, but was also remarkably different. It was sleeker, smoother. The head was streamlined, and the handle was polymer, lacking the metal and cloth grips of old. The blade behind the head was longer, sharper. It was unquestionably deadlier. Titus held it up, grinning at his adversary.

"This is going to be fun." He whispered to himself. Then, he let out a blood-curdling roar, and charged.

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Samus watched the screen in front of her with an expert eye. The gun battle that had just finished had been enough proof to her as to her potential recruit's weapons skill. Against a mixed-species troop of six with just a pistol? That was bounty hunter material. Even though if Kilo had been wearing armour, a few of his strategies wouldn't have worked, he was certainly smart enough to leverage the tactical utility that a suit of his own would give him.

The next test that popped into her head (admittedly, she was making them up as she went along) was taking down a heavy target. And as it had occurred to her, one such unit happened to be standing right next to her. Titus had been all too happy to oblige. Now, Kilo stood with the rest of the crowd, watching the screen as they gingerly nursed imaginary wounds. They wanted to have as much material as possible to retort their commander later on. Samus wanted information on the other combatant.

All eyes watched the screen. Titus charged. The Master Chief moved. The battle began.

****Aaaand I think I'll leave it there. Sorry this chapter didn't have much plot... Or emotion... Or anything else other than fighting. But hey, at least I'm not that bad at fight scenes!

****...****

****Right?****

****...****

****Well, tough. You've got another one coming up soon.****

****Anyway! Shout outs!****

****Wisty: Glad you like it! Hope I didn't disappoint!****

****ChaosxPaladin: Yeah, it is sad when good stories stop being updated, especially in a small fandom like this. I'll try not to let it happen here!****

****Jysshio: Glad you're liking it, and yes, it is set in the same universe as my SSB fics! I'll be dropping references every now and then. ;) (Please note, a slow update to the next chapter may or may not be attributed to SSBU.)****

****Also: no one has found the ME reference yet! No, it was not the name Miranda, nor anything about peacekeepers. The waffle is getting cold... Tell you what, I'll give a hint. It's to do with a specific Turian...****

****Anyway, see you all next time! R&R, as always!****

8. Chapter 8

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 8****

The Chief dove out of the way of the charging ape, rolling to his feet and firing three shots into his enemy's exposed back as he recovered, all dissipating harmlessly off his shields. Titus swung round, roaring, bringing the hammer with him in a deadly arc. The human ducked, the instrument of death whistling over his head, and he tackled the brute, knocking him to the ground, following up with a weighted punch to his adversary's shielded face. The particle wall flared, obscuring Titus' vision, and the Chief leapt away, rolling behind a wall.

Titus got to his feet and scanned his surroundings. Nothing in sight. Nothing on the motion tracker. A game of cat and mouse, then. He began to creep around, hammer out, checking behind each concrete barrier in turn. Peeking out from behind his own barrier, the Chief could see it was only a matter of time until he was caught. He had to find a weapon first.

As slowly as he could, he moved away from Titus, trying to retrace his steps to where he had previously beaten Kilo. No small task, given the change of scenery. At last, he stumbled across a shotgun. Good to know luck was still on his side. He popped out of cover,

sweeping his gaze over the battlefield. Titus had disappeared. Which meant...

He ducked and threw himself to the left, the crushing force of the hammer smashing down on where he had been milliseconds ago, the concrete barrier and floor blasted into rubble and dust by its immense destructive power. The booming echo of the gravity generator hurt his ears. Titus half-laughed, half-roared at the timely dodge, drawing the hammer back for another blow. The Chief rolled to his feet, span and let rip with the shotgun, hitting Titus square in the chest and staggering him. He fired again, and again, until another hammer swing forced him to retreat. Titus shouldered the hammer and drew his own shotgun, firing blasts of blue death from the hip.

The Chief's heightened reflexes kicked in as he dodged the slow blasts, returning fire when he could, until the weapon overheated, shutting down and unable to fire until it cooled. He snapped behind some more cover, glancing at the heat gauge. It was going down too slowly. He mentally cursed, and allowed his enhanced mind a brief second to think. How long could he keep this up? He needed to get those shields down as quickly as possible, and the sheer destructive force Titus could lay down kept him from firing continuously. He had to get some serious damage in without getting too close...

'Vadam's particle rifle. A few shots of concentrated damage could be what he needed to break Titus' shields and end the fight quickly. Without that, he was going to get hit. And he wouldn't last long in that state against a brute with the scent of blood in his nostrils. He rolled to the next barricade, plasma narrowly missing his back as he did, and took up position there. He fired a few suppressing shots with his pistol to keep the brute off of him, and looked around for the rifle.

To his surprise and dismay, it was barely a metre from his position. Unfortunately, it had been caught in the reprogram of the terrain, and was phased through a barricade. There was no way he was going to be able to pull it free, and without any explosives, he might as well be-

He glanced up over the top of the barricade, to the one where he had found the shotgun. The one that had been pulverised by Titus' hammer. If he could lead him over...

It was very risky. But it might just pay off. He pushed a button on the side of his pistol, causing the barrel to slide out and widen, LEDs lighting up on its surface. Kinetic overcharge mode. Low heat, high-density projectiles, designed for disabling light infantry. In a marksman's hands, it could be so much more. He jumped out of cover, locating Titus. He was trying to flank him, his bulk not helping the matter particularly. He fired one shot at the brute's exposed back, making him stumble and turn. He drew the hammer and vaulted over the barrier, charging, a roar building in his throat. The Chief calmly stepped in front of the rifle, concealing it, and aimed carefully with his pistol. One shot later, Titus' shotgun was blasted from his hip, clattering to the floor behind him. He barely noticed, continuing his charge.

The Chief waited. If he didn't time it right, he wouldn't free the rifle, or he might die. Even so, the rifle might be destroyed, and he'd be stuck in close quarters with the brute with his shotgun still

cooling down.

Adrenaline coursed through his veins. Titus seemed to move in slow motion. He was so close now that he could practically see the spit foaming in the brute's mouth.

Every muscle tensed, ready to burst. Titus began to leap into the air, hammer flying down in an unstoppable arc...

No...

No...

Steady...

Now!

The Chief dove past Titus with the agility of a matador, rolled, turned and slid to his feet as the intense gravity field crushed the concrete to smithereens. A compression pulse thrummed through the air like a musical note, jarring. He peered desperately into the dust cloud, looking for the rifle. If it had been destroyed, it would be best to-

The rifle came flying out from the collision's core, blue metal finish gleaming through the coat of dust. The Chief's hand snapped out like a cobra, grabbing the gun in an iron grip. In an instant, it was at his shoulder, the bolt was drawn back, his eye was at the scope, and the first shot was fired. It hit Titus' shoulder as he turned back to his adversary, a minuscule red glow appearing on the transparent glass visor over Titus' face. His shields were low. Time to finish this.

The next shot hit Titus in the head, shields flaring in distress. He flinched, but continued to turn. Another shot hammered into him, absorbed mere millimetres from his body. Another. Another. The rifle kicked back against the Chief's shoulder with every shot, each tearing through the air to hit their target perfectly.

Titus had regained his grip on the hammer and was gearing up for another attack. Damn it, why hadn't the shield dropped yet?! He fired yet another shot, hitting Titus square in the face, but it still did not break. Once again, he tried, but the rifle clicked empty, a spent ammunition cartridge popping from the side. He threw it away, drawing his pistol, and made ready to dodge again. Titus had wised up this time, though. He stopped in his charge, raising the hammer like a wand, and blue lightning crackled over it, arcing over the Chief's shoulder, earthing into a barricade. They leapt over its surface, and the stone block tore free from its place in the ground, flying towards the hammer. The Chief tried to dodge as he saw the attack, but the edge clipped his head, opening a bloody gash on his scalp and knocking him to his knees. His head swam, blood flowing like a waterfall over his left eye. He tried to stand, only to be hit by a wave of nausea, collapsing back onto his hands.

Titus tore the block from the hammer's head, tossing it away, and strode over to the Chief, who was again trying to stagger to his feet.

"Well fought, Master Chief." He shifted his grip on the hammer. "To nearly defeat an adversary at such high odds is no mean feat." He readied the blow, raising the weapon high. "In a fair fight, you would have destroyed me." The Chief finally struggled to his feet. His vision was swimming; he could barely make out Titus' face. Vague notions of impending doom flitted

Titus brought the hammer down, the blow ready to crush his adversary into pulp...

The Chief looked up, mind half-addled as he saw the weapon descend. His head was full of fog and pain, muddying his senses and instincts. He saw the threat, but it could not make its way through his mind. His heartbeat was like a booming slow drum in his ears, faraway and ethereal.

Then, suddenly, everything sharpened. Colours intensified, sounds became louder, clearer. He felt every fibre of his being in minute detail, every flow of air and particle of dust. The hammer just a foot above his head was first and foremost in his mind.

Acting on blind instinct and this sudden rush of clarity, he did a very stupid thing. His hands shot up to grab the hammer's shaft.

And with no small amount of surprise on his part, his grip held. His arm muscles shrieked with pain. as they absorbed the gargantuan force, but they did not fail him. Titus' eyes bulged, amazed by the show of unprecedented strength from the previously incapacitated man. The Chief's eyes were in a similar state, only with one screened by blood. The shock quickly wore off for the both of them, but it wore off for the Chief first. His screaming muscles flexed again, tearing the hammer from Titus' weakened grip, a roar of exertion escaping his mouth as he did. The stunned brute staggered forward, and the Chief spun, hands sliding down the handle of the hammer. With gritted teeth and thunderous eyes, he brought the heavy weapon round with shocking velocity, hitting Titus' armoured chest with a defending boom.

He flew back, shields sputtering, an alarm blaring in his helmet. He tensed in midair, making sure he would not be winded when he landed.

He fell against another barrier, and his shields finally gave out, bursting as his armour's battery ran dry. The numerous lights over the white plating winked out, and his HUD went dark.

The tide had turned.

The Chief was quick to close the gap, hammer clutched tightly in his hands. Titus panicked, hands reaching for his shotgun... But it wasn't there. It lay several metres away, completely out of reach. He barely had time to blink before the hammer was on him again, no shielding to protect him this time. He felt his very flesh warp and bend under the intense forces, his armour cracking, purple blood spurting out from every crevice. Several bones snapped like twigs. He let out a strangled, bubbling cry of pure agony, muffled by the blood gushing into his lungs. He groaned, all energy leaving his body, and collapsed to the ground. Pain throbbing through every cell of his body, he looked up with blurry vision at his opponent's silhouette. He blinked once and attempted to garble out speech, to no avail.

The Chief understood his intent regardless. He raised the hammer once more over Titus' head, and brought it down, splattering his skull over the floor.

Victory.

Damn, he had outdone himself this time...

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Titus gasped as his mind jumped back into his body, all the pain evaporating instantly as the simulation ended. Then, he laughed, deep, booming and satisfied.

"Best fight of my life..." He grinned. Kilo smiled back at him, with varying degrees of schadenfreude. Samus barely noticed. She was scanning data from the fight. Specifically, the moment that the hammer had been caught and reversed. Easily the defining moment of the battle, but it didn't seem... real to her. Catching a full-force gravity hammer swing, even for an augmented fighter, was impressive. A little too impressive, this time, for her liking. She was, quite frankly, fed up of being grudgingly impressed.

The simulator performed a simple bio-scan of its occupants every 0.25 seconds to judge their real body's reaction to the simulated stimulus, then taking it into account when feeding data to the mind. Had it malfunctioned? The sudden show of strength didn't sit right with her.

She checked the relevant coding. The Chief's brain activity had spiked in all lobes, then had almost completely shut down in certain areas. All signs pointed towards it being genuine, but it was still odd. Just how far had he been changed by all those procedures? She'd been lucky, despite multiple infusions of different alien's DNA, she'd remained virtually the same inside her head. Her body looked the same, felt the same, but worked differently under the hood, and she was fine with that. If it started being unruly... It would alarm her to say the least. She wondered if he knew exactly what had been done to him...

All the same, he'd passed with flying colours. Again. That was enough for her. She opened Titus' pod, then made to speak to the Chief, who was leaning on the hammer, more than a bit healed the gash on his head, and gave him another predatory smile.

"Not bad." He grunted in response, not even bothering to speak this time. "Had enough for one day?"

"...Yeah."

And he was back in the pod. The doors slid open, and he stepped, wearied and ever so slightly sweaty, out. The small crowd cheered and patted him on the back, Titus even choking up a little in his own congratulations. It was flattering, but unnecessary.

The crowd eventually dissolved, the attendees getting back to whatever duties they had been doing in the first place, and Titus taking Kilo out for a four-mile run. Eventually, all that was left was him and Samus. He was honestly curious as to why she stayed, and didn't have to wait long to find out. Bluntly, she spoke out after a

brief silence.

"You're not sure what to do next, are you?" He paused.

"Bio-scan, then psyche exa-"

"I meant with your career." He paused again, wary.

"A bit."

"Look, Johnny, you're not that impenetrable. You don't want to give it up. You were having at least a little bit of fun in there. And you know that if you reenlist you're never going to see a battlefield up close again, not with all the PR value you have for the Federation."

He considered this. It was true. War heroes didn't jump back into battle whenever they felt like it. They stayed at home after the conflict was over, had kids, motivated the next generation of soldiers to fight.

He didn't want that. He wanted to keep going. And she was right, he wouldn't be doing that in the military. And he certainly wouldn't be doing it as a civilian, even if he got a job as a combat instructor at that very building.

"And you have a better idea?" He said, monotone intact, but tinged with accusation.

"That depends on you." She retorted. "Come find me in room J-194 after you're done with those jobs. I'll tell you then." And with that, she left the room.

Standing in the cavernous gym, very much alone, the Chief's hand involuntarily reached into his pocket to clutch the data chip that sat there.

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He had gone through both tests quickly. The psyche exam showed nothing new. Slight sociopathic tendencies, but he already knew that. All of his brothers and sisters had it to some degree. During the test, his thoughts had wandered to them more than once. Had they gone through the same challenges he was going through after the war? Had they just straight up died first?

The shrink had to bring him back into focus more than once.

On top of that, he was also diagnosed with slight PTSD. The woman had said that in a case as unusual as his, it wasn't wrong to feel bewildered or intimidated. Everything was different.

She should have told him something he didn't know. Yes, he might be the slightest bit traumatised, but it wasn't major. He was coping.

...Well enough.

The bio-scan confirmed what Cortana had said. She had improved him. He was a bit faster, a bit smarter, and a lot stronger. Catching a

gravity hammer with his bare hands was apparently something he could actually do now. That opened up some options.

They'd also taken a look at his neural link. A small metal port on the back of his neck, linking directly into his brain. His suit would connect in and allow it to move with him, as well as allowing an AI to use any of his "wetware" that he wasn't for a bit of extra processing power.

Nowadays, they had told him, links were semi-organic, allowing for a much smoother and more powerful connection. But they couldn't very well just replace his one. They said it could be surgically updated a bit, but not totally, otherwise risking significant trauma. In any case, it didn't happen then. That was a big operation.

And so he found himself on his way to room J-194. He hesitated outside the door for a moment, then lightly rapped on the door. She arrived to open the door quickly. Perhaps a little too quickly. Had she been waiting for him? Maybe. He doubted she had other appointments.

She wordlessly waved him in, then briefly darted from the room to retrieve her data pad. She then sat down in one of two single-seat leather chairs arranged around a coffee table. He did the same after another brief moment. She turned the tablet on, flicked the screen a few times, and sat, staring at it. The silence between them was stifling.

"Are you going to-"

"Do you-" They both started at the same time. They exchanged a glance, the tension already down a few notches. Samus started again.

"Do you know what your kill count is?" The Chief thought for a second.

"No." He'd never considered his... statistics before. They were largely irrelevant to him.

"Can you guess?" He thought again.

"Ten thousand?" She smiled.

"Ten thousand confirmed. There's still the matter of unverifiable casualties on..." She scrolled through something on the tablet. "Installation 04, the Unyielding Heirophant, Installation 00 and numerous destroyed Covenant ships." She looked back up at him. "It's pretty similar to my own."

She got up and walked to the window, him following her movement. It was getting late, and the light had already sunk below the horizon. Buildings and cars twinkled red, blue and white in the semi-darkness.

"We're pretty similar people in more than that way as well." She continued.

"Agreed." He said. She turned back around to look at him.

"And that's why I feel like I should help you out. Unlike most people, I can sympathise with what you've done. And I like to think you could do the same to me." He nodded.

"That I can." She smiled at him again, this one not predatory, but moderately thankful, if not exactly friendly. She went and sat down again.

"So, now we're on the same page, let's pick up where we left off."

"I don't know what I'm going to do." He stated. "You had a suggestion."

"Yes, I did." She laid the pad out on the armrest next to her, and clasped her hands together in her lap. "Bounty hunting." A slight frown formed on the Chief's face.

"Mercenary work?" He'd never liked mercs. They had no loyalties, no ties. They could turn on you in an instant if you turned your back. Samus looked the slightest bit offended by the term, however.

"Not quite. There is a distinction. Mercs flock towards jobs posted by corporations or gangs. They work in groups, clans, whatever you want to call them. Working for steady pay, grunt work. Bounty hunters..." She paused. "People ask hunters to do jobs. We have to play by the rules, after all we have a reputation to uphold, but they're our rules. You live by your own code. You fight for whatever you want to fight for."

That last sentence stuck in the Chief's mind. His own reason to fight. She'd said that to him. Right at the end.

"...What would I do?" She shrugged.

"Find people who need their village protected, a biological sample retrieved, a mob boss assassinated. Decide whether to take the job or not. Get a reputation. Be loved, be feared." He stared at the carpet for a while. It was actually sounding like a viable idea. All the carnage he came to expect from his life, no bureaucracy, and his own values to live by.

"...What would I need?" She thought for a second.

"Skill, weapons, a suit, a ship, and a name." She seemed pleased he was taking the idea seriously. "You've got the first one already. You can get the next two by asking the council nicely. A ship is more of a problem, but not too hard. Then, there's your calling card. You can be the Chief to your friends and allies, but not to your enemies. To the Federation, I'm Samus Aran. To pirates, brigands and Kriken, I'm The Hunter. You need something that can be feared, respected."

"Demon." He interrupted. She stopped.

"What?"

"The Covenant called me Demon." She raised her eyebrows, then settled back down and smiled.

"That works. You like the idea, then?"

Did he? Sure, it sounded better than his other options at the moment, but... Ah, hell, what did he have to lose? This wasn't his world. He didn't want to go out quietly in the corner. He wanted to be doing something, making a difference. And the world probably wouldn't miss him if he died. It sounded good. It was high time he started being a bit impulsive.

"Yes. I like it. Thank you." She smiled at him again, genuinely.

"Of course, you probably need time to--"

"I'll talk to the council tomorrow." He butted in, getting up from his seat. She stopped and stared, a little shocked.

"So soon? You don't want to think about it?"

"What else am I going to do? This is the best option I've heard so far." He paused in front of the door. "Titus said that I'd always be the Master Chief. And he was right. But I'm my own man as well now. And this is just the job for a free man with a big gun." He opened the door, and looked back over his shoulder at her. "Thank you... Sammie." And then he left.

She was left feeling slightly bewildered. He'd hated it, then loved it, then sincerely thanked her and turned her childish nickname for him back on her. She shortly gave up on the tangled knot of feelings and merely relaxed into her chair. If he did become a bounty hunter, then she'd definitely run into him again. And unlike confrontations with most hunters, she found herself looking forward to it.

****Bam! There you go, guv'nor! One fresh chapter! Enjoy while hot! Got the fight in there, as well as some extra plot, (or at least what will eventually become relevant to the plot) and a little bit of character development to boot! Everybody wins! (But mostly me.)****

****Now, for the shoutouts...****

****JohnRyan117 Esp: Here you gooooooooooooooooooooo****

****the rakiat: Hoped you liked the fight scene! And you are right, I haven't used too many Metroid races, but it's kind of because the Metroid canon is a little bit sparse on the ground in that regard. A lot of species have only ever seen one individual, and there's very little on their culture as well. The more well-developed ones like the Lumioth aren't part of the GF either, so it's difficult. Halo just tends to give me more material to work with. I'll make an effort to balance it out though. As for your new idea, I'm not sure I'll be able to do anything with it. It sounds great, don't get me wrong, but there isn't the space in the plot line, really. Sorry. Hope you enjoy what I come up with, regardless!****

****combativeThinker: Thanks for the tip! It really helped. I tried to work some of the stuff into the Titus fight above, but that kind of prose is difficult to weave in. Plus, in a simulator, I couldn't think of many emotional revelations. I'll try harder when the battles get real!****

** : I was going to just Metroid-ify the design's description a bit, more of a hardsuit than plating. Although it looks very cool, that design isn't really what I had in mind. Nice find though. :)
**

The Nine Warrior: Your praise, it inspires me! But I count only eight among your number...

D3rozic: Indeed it is! Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner! The reference has been found! Here is your waffle: (#) Enjoy, and congratulations!

Arsenel: Yeah, as I said to the rakiat, the Halo universe just tends to give me more to work with. Vaxus was from one of the more fleshed-out races, so I felt I really should add him in too. Don't worry, there will be a lot more Metroid later on.

Da-Awesom-One: I've read a couple of the Halo books, and it has been shown that he does smile occasionally in battle, like when an enemy makes a tactical mistake or something. I made him smile because he was back in a familiar environment again, feeling a bit safer, ironically. It's a bit iffy though, in hindsight, I agree.

SPARTAN-626: I've kind of glossed over these weapons's descriptions because they aren't going to be all that prevalent later on in the story. When the main ones show up, I'll give you a lot more description, don't worry. As for a pairing, I'm still doubtful, leaning towards no. I feel it kind of works better as a friendship really. Sorry.

Anonymous: I was thinking of the King of the Hill thing, yes. Skills like that don't fade... Also, don't worry, there will be many, many enemies from both universes.

FAN-OF-EPIC-FANTASY: As I said to SPARTAN-626, probably not. Sorry.

Alright, that about wraps it up! See you next time!

9. Chapter 9

Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 9

Morning light filtered in through the window, coming to rest on the still-sleeping face of the Master Chief. His eyes twitched and creaked open, squinting through the sunlight. Routine kicked in, and he sat up, throwing off the covers of the bed he had just finished sleeping like a rock in. It had been an odd experience. One would think that a military base wouldn't bother with high-quality mattresses, and it was definitely not what he was used to. Not unpleasant, by any means, just... Different. Then again, everything was different now.

He quickly showered and put on a fresh pair of clothes, trying to look respectable. He was about to go and ask the world governing body for the means and permission to go and cavort around the galaxy unfettered with a very large gun in his hand, after all. It was going to take a bit of persuasion.

The room had a small kitchenette (he was beginning to think that it might be a VIP room) and he made himself something that he assumed was cereal for breakfast. His eyes scanned over the report he had sent to the council the previous evening on the provided tablet. He briefly wondered if he'd be allowed to keep it. He then wondered whether it was a good idea to do so anyway. It could have a tracer. The extranet had seemed to have a rather mixed view of the Federation. On the one hand, it had brought peace and prosperity, but on the other, corruption and power struggles ran rampant behind the curtain. He wasn't sure he liked the council, either. A lot of old men and aliens, all with that Machiavellian glint in their eyes. Honestly, he was eager to get away and start a new career. Hopefully this one wouldn't end with him frozen on a ship with his guardian dying a slow death outside.

With that off-hand thought, it all came crashing down on him again. Everyone he had ever known and loved was long dead and buried. He was alone. Completely alone. Cortana had died alone and half-mad, all to make sure he survived. Was it his fault?

Well, he had been effectively comatose at the time. And it was either go to sleep or starve to death before that. So, no. It couldn't have been. But that only made it worse. He had been powerless, unable to help or comfort her in any way before she died.

He leaned forward, running his hands through his short fuzz of brown hair. It was no use beating himself up about it. He had a job to do now, and this baggage was unlikely to be helpful.

He stood, cleaned up and left the room, pushing the pain down once more.

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A quick call ahead later, another chauffeur was outside, ready to take him back to the council. As he sat silently in the cabin, he wondered how exactly he was going to spin it. He hadn't exactly planned ahead. What was he going to say? Probably just out and say what he wanted. It would look rather awkward for them if they refused, after all. And if not, he could probably knock what he needed together from his back pay, if they were serious about that.

The car stopped outside the curiously shaped council building, and with a short word of thanks he was out, his jacket flapping about in the wind. The purple secretary waved him through, and he entered the lift up to the chamber. The guard at the top nodded to the man chamber's door when he arrived.

"They're expecting you." He rumbled through his helmet. The Chief stepped through the sliding door, walking back into the council's amphitheater. He was surprised to see the engineer who had removed his armour currently in audience, talking to the human councillor. The two heard the door close behind him, and looked over. They were both smiling.

"Ah, the man of the hour arrives!" Said the older man. "Splendid timing. We were just talking about you." The engineer beamed at him. The small man looked quite tired, but inexplicably euphoric too. The

councillor looked at him. "Go on, Mr Conagher, explain your findings." The technician nodded, and tapped at a PDA.

"Whilst decommissioning your armour, I found a set of files in the main memory unit that are frankly, priceless. As yet unheard of translated Forerunner messages and schematics, presumably decrypted by your AI unit over the, uh... long haul." John felt a stab of pain at the mention, but didn't interrupt the man. "They've given us incredible insights into pieces of Forerunner tech that we thought were centuries of research beyond our grasp! We're wheeling artefacts out of the archives as we speak, now we can finally make them work!" The councillor looked down at the Spartan, smiling warmly.

"It seems you surprise us yet again, Master Chief. This is a priceless gift. Need you any remuneration from the council, you have it, no questions asked."

Bingo. At first he was hesitant about letting the Federation have this miracle data, but if it helped him now...

"As a matter of fact, councillor, that may tie into what I wanted to ask you today." The old man nodded.

"Alright then. Mr Conagher, will you be so kind as to let us converse? I'm sure you have other things you wish to be doing..."

"Definitely, your honour." The techie turned and made to leave, pausing by the Chief for a second. "Thanks for this." He said. "The biggest tech revelation in fifty years and I'm slap bang in the middle of it...!"

He passed by and left, leaving the Chief alone with the council. The human politician leant forward.

"So, Master Chief, what is it you wished to discuss? Your plans for the future?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. Let us hear it, then." The Chief paused. Here it was. All or nothing.

"I want to become a bounty hunter."

The resulting silence was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. The councillors broke out into murmurs. The Chief continued on. "I believe that this is the most appropriate job for me to do. I want to keep fighting, and although I am grateful for the offer, I wouldn't want to be a commissioned officer."

"On such short notice..." Started the incredulous human in front of him. "Are you sure...?"

"Yes, sir. I am. I would like to ask for the council's aid in assembling the necessary tools and equipment for the profession." The request hung in the air. The older human looked around the chamber at the various species. Most of them looked surprised. Some were appalled. Others were glaring at him expectantly. He opened his mouth to speak... Only for another to speak before him.

"Esteemed councillors, who are we to deny this hero his wish?" The voice was slow and somber. All eyes turned to its owner, a tall, wide figure, covered in feathers and possessed of avian features. A Chozo. One of the last of his kind. His face was worn, beak wide and eyes kindly, his plumage a mottled brown. He did not flinch under so many gazes, staring down at the source of the disarray. He spoke again. "Surely the Galaxy owes him at least this much? Although..." He tilted his head slightly. "...Whilst I respect his wish, I do not understand why he wishes to do so..."

John felt the old bird's gaze on him, almost piercing. These were truth seeker's eyes.

"It's what I'm good at." He replied. "I can't imagine doing anything else." The Chozo councillor nodded slowly.

"And is it what you want to do? Return to war in a time of peace?" He met the bird's eyes, knowing he was quite unsettling as well.

"Yes."

The Chozo bowed his head and sat back down in his seat. He looked almost... Sad.

The human councillor looked around the chamber, the denizens having been silenced.

"Will any oppose the request?" He called out. No one replied. He blinked and spoke again. "Very well. We accept your decision, and will aid in the acquisition of anything you require for your venture. Did you have anything in mind?" Just like that? He'd done it?

"A custom armoured suit, some weaponry, and a ship." He spouted. Success. Another nod.

"Ah. That should not be a problem. We shall contact you with details when you are required in the process." Various further nods were exchanged, and the Chief left the room. The council relaxed back into its rhythm, and the Phrygisian councillor took the human's place as speaker for the next cases. The human in question took his seat and began to stew over the events that had just happened.

The situation was unfortunate. The Master Chief would have been a great asset had he joined the Federation. Now he was going to be let loose on the Galaxy. It was unlikely that he'd do any harm, but it was regrettable to let him go. Links would have to be kept. Perhaps getting him to prototype new gear? He would have to return to have bugs fixed, allowing them to monitor him... Yes. That was a preferable course of action.

He wondered where he had gotten the idea from. Samus Aran no doubt. He'd either admired her lifestyle, or she had suggested it to him. She'd always been a wildcard go the Federation. Quitting it's army, only to return to work for it, then betraying them over the X. She would likely need monitoring as well now... And there was certainly enough leverage in place to keep the relationship between them and her from collapsing for the time being.

Why not... Why not make them travel together? Force them onto the same ship? They'd both have to return for the Chief's armour debugs, and it would likely stabilise them both to have such a conflicting personality working with them...

But he'd have to verify her involvement first. Luckily, that was just a short call away.

Silently and discreetly, the councillor booted up the phone in his neural implant. Making the best of a situation had always been a specialty of his...

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Samus was sitting in a coffee shop with a sandwich and drink when she got the call. She'd taken the opportunity to sleep in that morning, something she very rarely did, and had decided to pop out for some real food for breakfast. Halfway through, her pocket buzzed, and she pulled out her small, functional phone. It was relatively unused, given as she only used it for communication, and most people she communicated with either did it in person or via a job listing. She didn't exactly socialise much.

She read the display: a blocked number. That meant Federation. Sighing, she pressed it to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Ah, Miss Aran." The councillor's pleasant tone piped through the speaker. "Are you well?"

"Yes." She replied curtly. "Why have you contacted me?" The next sentence through the speaker was less pleasant, almost accusatory.

"The Master Chief came to us not five minutes ago with the request for aid in acquiring the necessary equipment to become a bounty hunter. I don't suppose you had anything to do with that?" She kept her face blank.

"I may have."

"Don't be coy, Miss Aran. That was a yes." He sighed. "You may have just cost us a valuable asset. Not the best start to your new relationship with the Federation. We are, however, willing to overlook it, in exchange for an extended favour."

"And what would that be?"

"Take him with you for a while. Make sure he doesn't die on the first mission. Talented he is, experienced in this world he is not. Of course, we'd provide the necessary..."

"Do you understand what you're asking me, councillor?" She interrupted him. "You're asking me to babysit." There was the slightest edge of venom to the last word.

"Not at all. I am asking you to teach this man, impart knowledge. Then, when you deem him knowledgeable enough of our time's way of combat, you can go on your merry way. Should you refuse, however, the

consequences will be... Dire." Samus clenched her jaw. She didn't really have a choice here. She needed to stay on the GF's good side, or the whole charade would have been in vain.

"...Fine. I'll need a bigger ship, for starters. And a few energy tanks wouldn't go amiss."

"Done. I'll throw in some prototype gear as well, for good measure." She didn't see anything wrong with that. Adam could check it for spyware.

"Fine. Does he know?"

"No. He knows that we approved his request, but nothing else. I leave it to you to tell him the details of his transportation. Also, tell him his requisition is conditional depending on whether he accepts or not." Samus was about to put the phone down, but the councillor cut in again.

"Miss Aran?" She contemplated putting the phone down anyway.

"...Yes?"

"Please, don't take this as ill will. You've mildly inconvenienced us, and we mildly inconvenience you in turn. That is no reason for a grudge, is it not?"

"...No." She sighed.

"The Federation values you, Miss Aran, and we have no reason to vindicate you. I know you see us as a bunch of controlling bastards, but we have similarly derogatory opinions of you. Such is the nature of a healthy relationship."

"Quite." She felt slightly assured by the councillor's admittance. He was being honest, that much was true, and it was definitely refreshing. She didn't like it, but it was reasonable enough. Who knew, she might even pick up a few tricks from the Chief as well.

"Very well. We look forward to working with you."

He hung up. Samus finished her breakfast, got up and walked out the door in the direction of the Federation base.

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The Chief grunted, blinking a stray drop of sweat from his eye as he continued his exercise. He'd been in the gym for a few hours now, having seen no more productive alternative use of his time waiting for his requisition to go through. He was currently doing pull-ups on a suspended metal bar, waiting for the real burn to set into his muscles before he went all out. No point in counting when there was no one to compete with. A few others had passed through the gym, but no one had recognised him. The helmet was more of an icon than he was.

Right now, a Jovian male was packing up to leave, giving the Spartan a friendly nod as he slung his bag over his shoulder and made for the

door. As he passed through, another figure walked past him, going in the opposite direction. Aran again. She wasn't looking terribly cheerful.

She walked directly over to him, stopping to stand directly before him.

"Morning." She said. He carried on doing pull ups.

"Mmhm." He replied. "You come here to see me?"

"Yes, actually. Didn't take long to find you." He snorted. He wasn't likely to be anywhere else, was he?

"So...?" She sighed.

"The Council has ordered me to take you with me on a few missions. Get you to learn the ropes, or something. Basically, they want to make sure you don't mess up and die."

The Chief's booted feet dropped to the floor, which wasn't much of a distance. He crossed his arms.

"You can't be happy about that."

"I'm not. And you probably don't like it either."

"No offence, but I prefer working with people I trust."

"None taken. But he did say you wouldn't be getting your requisition if you didn't agree." The Chief blinked, then sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What's stopping you from just leaving?"

"You think I woke a cranky super-soldier up on the wrong side of bed to just ditch the benefit of doing so? I need to stay on good terms with the Federation." He groaned.

"Looks like neither of us have a choice then."

"Quite. All the same..." She stuck out a hand. "Pleasure to be working with you, Mr One-hundred and seventeen."

He reached out and shook it, the faintest twitch of an eyebrow betraying his minor amusement.

"And with you, Miss Aran."

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Later that day, they both received a message. Their new equipment would be ready in three days.

The Chief, not seeing any better way of passing the time, spent the time predominantly in the gym, sparring with Kilo or exercising his newfound strength. He'd been hitting all sorts of personal records, and it was only getting better as he trained. He usually felt a little weaker after a long sleep, but never so much that he improved this much in the proceeding days.

Likewise, Samus spent a lot of her time in the target range, practising with her arm cannon, Paralyser and grapple beam. In order to compensate for her weaponry's slow shot movement, she needed dead-on target leading and accuracy. Anything less was personally unacceptable, and would be ruthlessly practised until perfect.

It was safe to say that neither of them had a social life. Nevertheless, they saw nothing of each other for the whole period.

Then came the summons to the centre's engineering workshop for their equipment.

John walked in to find Samus already waiting. They exchanged a nod, and sat down in the impromptu waiting room in the corridor outside.

Eventually, a glass-goggled man in dirty overalls opened the door, stepping out to greet them. The Chief recognised him as the engineer that had removed his armour. The man smiled at him before turning to Samus. He handed her a small flash drive.

"There you are, Miss, all the flash-generation blueprints for your promised prototype gear, fresh off the AI grid. You might want to stock up a little on Iridium, though, one of those things takes quite a lot. Any bugs happen, come see us." She inspected it, and nodded.

"Alright. And..."

"Ah, yes. Can't forget that, can we?" He took a small black box out of his pocket, proffering it to her. She pressed her thumb to it, and a green glow scanned it. A small metal spike took a blood sample, the box buzzed for a second and beeped an affirmative conclusion. He pocketed the box, smiling. "There, ship should recognise you now. Hangar 22, South City spaceport. Have fun."

"Thank you." She replied, then turned to the Chief. "Meet me there when you're done." She walked off down the hall, and the technician turned to his second charge.

"Now, here's the interesting bit..." He smiled, opening the door for the two of them.

The metal-walled workshop was chaotic, covered in grime, and smelt slightly of ozone. At various workstations, various species tinkered with machinery, tapped on keyboards and in one case, frantically hosed a project down with a fire extinguisher. "Don't worry." The guide said. "That there isn't for you."

They rounded a corner, coming to a large steel tube on the corner of the wall. The engineer picked up a control pad from an adjacent table, and turned to the Chief.

"In here is your brand new suit. Have to say, sir, you're really reaping the benefits of that data you brought in. We've managed to incorporate thirty-five new Forerunner subsystems into this, and we've only scratched the surface of the archives. There's a huge one that we get to work on soon- Sorry, sorry. I'm getting off track.

Ahem..." He cleared his throat.

"Now. Custom tailored to your specific physiology and skill set, may I present... The Ares-Class Combat Skin." He pushed a button on the controller, and the tube slid open, revealing the suit, suspended in midair.

The suit certainly looked familiar. Olive green armour, shining golden visor, the distinctive wraparound helmet. They hadn't been particularly liberal with his look. He took a step towards it.

It was similar to his old suit, yes, but there were differences as well. The bulkiness remained, but seemed more rounded now, the edges smoothed over. The plating fit close to the black undersuit, giving more defensive coverage than before. The hands were fully armoured, featuring segmented finger joints, as well as what appeared to be a small hardpocket in each wrist. He reached out and held the cold metal of the shoulder, spinning it around so he could see the back. Two glowing orange lines curved down the back, pulsing gently, presumably to do with the shields. The ever-present magnetic strips on the calf and back remained, as did the data port on the back of the helmet. It looked like... Like him. For years, to all but a few, the armour had been his face. And this looked almost exactly like it, updated and ready for anything the new age threw at it.

"You like it?" The technician smiled as he span it back around. He watched his reflection in the visor.

"...Yes. I do."

"Then you're going to love the new features." The engineer tapped a button on the pad, and the suit disappeared into a shower of particles, slipping through the Chief's fingers and into a large port on the pod's roof, leaving only the undersuit behind. The Chief stepped back, alarmed. "Firstly, it utilises flash-generation tech, meaning an authorised unit with the blueprints can essentially just form the suit around you whenever you want, so long as you're wearing the undersuit, that is." He gestured to a small changing cubicle. The Chief took the metallic suit and wandered in, leaving with it on, clinging like a second skin to his body all the way up to his chin, and a data chip clutched in his hand. The engineer noticed. "You'll need to put that down to generate the suit. Otherwise, you can end up with a phase-through, and that gets ugly." Grudgingly, the Chief placed the chip down on the nearest table. "Okay, now, first time can be a bit tricky sometimes, but just... Will the suit on." It sounded ludicrous, but he shut his eyes and did it anyway. He felt an odd pressure in his head, then a feeling like a floodgate bursting, and the second skin gained weight, the armour appearing on his body.

He felt the familiar power rush as the force-multiplying circuits activated, putting nigh unstoppable force behind his every body movement. His neural link connected, and the suit linked to his brain. He moved an arm, and it jumped into position before he even finished the thought. They'd preserved some of the Mjolnir's best features in this.

"I can see you know we kept a couple of those old systems. Thought we'd make it more homely for you. Likewise, your shields work off the old system, too. Self regenerating, low capacity compared to most batteries. Still strong enough to tank a few mines, though. All

thanks to hardlight shielding. Never quite cracked it before those codes of yours came through, but we can start rolling it out now. Here, catch." The Chief nodded absentmindedly, looking at his hands, and caught the helmet thrown his way without even registering it. A few days out of his suit and it was all such a novelty again...

He turned the helmet over, inspecting the port. Quickly, he reached for the chip on the table, and slotted it into the back. He felt a little better for that. He put the helmet on.

"We ported over the design the old VISR system used. You've got your shield, weapon diagnostics, motion tracker, the works." Putting on the helmet, the familiar layout booted up. It was feeling more homely by the minute.

"Now, for the new stuff..." The technician grinned. "Those pockets in your wrists, open one up." He did so, and a handle grip fell out into his hand. Immediately, a luminous orange blade sprung from the end, wickedly sharp. "Two hardlight combat knives. Amazing stuff, hardlight. Ultra-dense, ultra-light, nearly indestructible, and instantly available in any shape or size from a generator." The Chief returned the blade to its home, and the engineer tapped the back plate of the suit.

"That generator's in here. Powers your shields, those knives, any a bunch of other stuff I haven't showed you yet. Use anything too much though, you'll exhaust other systems, and have to wait for a recharge." The Chief nodded.

"What are the other systems?"

"Two more. Just look at your palms." He did so, and was surprised to see white crystalline circles on each.

"What are they?"

"Structural projectors. Hardlight is a brilliant building material, so long as it stays powered. That means you can use it for things... Like... This!" A few taps of the pad, and a tiny blue cube appeared over each of the projectors. They spun gently in the air, and disappeared. "You've got blueprints loaded for domed shields, stationary turrets, and tons more in that suit. Make use of it, just be careful. It takes a lot of power for something to stay active for long. Now, where did I put- Ah! The crowning glory of the lot!"

After rummaging briefly through the mess of a workbench, the techie brought out what looked like the grip of a pistol. It was white and smooth, like marble, attached to what looked like a small block of the same material. It barely looked like a weapon.

"This is the Hephaestus Multipurpose Arms Platform. Exclusively for use with the Ares." He held it out to the Chief via the block. Taking it, he held it experimentally, pulling the trigger to no effect.

"How...?" He incoherently asked. "How does it work?" The engineer smiled, ever happy to talk about it.

"Same way all the systems work. Neural control. Project the thought

of whatever you want to be using into the handle." The Chief blinked. A rifle.

Instantly, the block atop the handle sprung out into a shower of tiny boxlike units, stopping dead and forming the outline of a rifle, the framework quickly filled by orange hardlight. Less than a second later, a fully functioning weapon had formed in his hands. He almost dropped it, but tried again. A shotgun. The shards jumped away as the hardlight reformed, filling the new shape given by the outline; a thick, tubelike 8-gauge shotgun.

"Change weapons to match the situation on the fly. You've got pretty much unlimited tactical flexibility. Plus, all the weapons use hardlight rounds, which have been damn effective in simulations." The Chief looked at the weapon, ordering it to collapse down to its base state, it complying near instantly. A weapon that could change form at any time. From a shield-draining automatic to a high-calibre precision finisher. Anti-armour one moment, anti-personnel the next. It was perfect. He clipped it to his thigh and turned to the smaller man.

"This is all brilliant. Thank you." He held out an armoured hand. The engineer grinned, (He did that a lot.) and shook it.

"My pleasure, Sir. Now get out there and wear it in."

I think I'll leave it there. Usually endings have a bit more closure, but this one is getting kinda long.

So, what did you lot think of the Ares? No prizes for guessing why I called it that. Or for the Hephaestus. Pretty neat bit of kit, eh? Although generally, the main reason I came up with it was so I didn't have to constantly write inventories of equipment. After reading Halo: The Flood, I can tell you that that gets boring really, really fast. I did it for you...

Also, there's a new Reference Race in here! (Yes, I'm calling it that now. Don't judge me.) This one is a TF2 reference, and quite a nerdy one at that. Don't worry, nobody here will care. You know the prize, get searching!

Also, shoutouts!

Jachabo: Lumioth coming right up!

Guest: If you've got an issue with the timeline, be sure to let me know, so I can correct it. Glad you like the story, though. :)

SaintMichael95: The second one. ;) And I'm afraid I have no link to show you. I came up with the idea myself, but I can't draw for toffee. Sorry about that.

TheAccursedHunter01: Samus will get her opportunity to show off next chapter, don't you worry. And the second wind will be explained in time. As for the final thing... Dammit. Sorry about that. I'll see about correcting it.

TheMetaReborn: Glad you like it, but I'm not sure about trading it for H4... Loved that game. :)

****Hazzamo: Not quite... Not quite... *evil laugh*****

****The rakiat: Far Cry 3, if I'm not mistaken? Coincidentally, I just got FC4. If it has anything as good as the Weed Field mission in FC3, I'll be happy. In any case, thanks for the review!****

****SPARTAN-626: Here's the system I was talking about. I think it meshes well with some of the weapons you suggested, and it'll definitely see some use. Hope you like it!****

****SilenceCmdr: Glad you like the story, and hope you like the armour just as much!****

****ChaosxPaladin: I couldn't just split them up, could I?
:)****

****Anyway, new ship next chapter, as well as the first job! Hope you're looking forward to it! Until then, bye!****

10. Chapter 10

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 10****

****(Quick note before I start: I'm really, really sorry this took so long to come out. A dastardly combination of exams, a badly timed family holiday and an attack of the plot bunnies struck, compelling me do a tiny oneshot because it was funny, and another massive one because it got stuck in my head and I needed to get it out. Before I knew it, it was ten pages long. Even got writer's block in the middle of it. I'll try not to let it happen again. That said, I'll finally get started!)****

Samus' footsteps echoed through the empty halls of the spaceport as she searched for Hangar 22, a can of atomic iridium in her hand. It seemed this particular part of the spaceport was reserved for the Federation military, given the glimpses she'd had through tiny windows into hangars 10 through 21.

She reached the looming doors of Hangar 22, and stood expectantly outside. A moment later, they began to grind open for her, revealing her promised ship.

She stood her ground for half a minute, admiring it. For her own amusement, she gave a low whistle. Smiling, she began to walk down the steps for a closer look.

It was, to her approval, red and orange again, with an iridescent green windshield. It was also considerably larger, barely capable of being called a gunship anymore. It looked more like a small cruiser, long and sleek, with various fins concealing booster jets for added manoeuvrability. Twin impulse drives protruded from the back, boasting impressive FTL mileage, and on the other side, concealed beam cannons. It was a bigger target than her old ships, but it had the plating and hitting power to make up for it. She noticed a name burnt into the ship's left side. The Valkyrie. Fitting.

She made her way under the landing gear, the ship humming into life as it detected her presence. A green beam shot out from the

underside, and she was aboard. The walls and doors were a silvery metal, tough and steely. Further exploration showed full living arrangements in the back of the ship, including two bedrooms. Nestled under it was a small cargo bay and a much larger hyperspace pocket store, for anything deemed necessary to take along with her.

She eventually reached the cockpit, finding Adam waiting for her inside. He stood on a pedestal in the centre of the room, flanked on each side by a chair. Pilot and co-pilot. By the looks of the arrangement, weapons were controlled secondarily, but could be transferred to and fro between operatives. Handy. Adam watched her survey the room.

"What's your opinion?" He asked. She sat down in the pilot seat.

"Not bad." She smiled. "Not bad at all." This might not be such a bad partnership after all. If John turned out to be overly obnoxious, then there was plenty of space on the ship. And it was certainly less spartan than her previous ship, judging by the comfort of the chair. There was something to be said for the relative luxury, but perhaps a bit more hardship would keep her on her toes a little more.

Remembering the blueprints given to her by the engineer, she pulled the flash drive out of her pocket and plugged it into the appropriate port on the control panel. Adam began sifting through the files, eyes closed as he observed other things.

"This is the prototype tech they gave you?"

"Yes. Is it any good?"

"Let me see. I'll get rid of the spyware first... Done. You can't blame them for trying. Now, let's see... Yes, this should be quite useful for you."

"Details, please, Adam."

"Of course. To start, there's a precision laser weapon here. You could use more long-ranged versatility. A few nanoscopic ablative structures and cannon wattage improvements... More interestingly, a limited active camouflage module. And then..." He paused. "There's this."

He pulled up a hologram of the newest design. At first, it was a simple representation of her left gauntlet, the arm not carrying a cannon. Then, a small nodule appeared on the outside of the wrist, barely two centimetres long. Out of that sprung an intimidatingly large blade, composed of plasma and bright green. "An energy machete, apparently. Might be very handy in close combat."

"They clearly didn't skimp on the apology gifts, then. Anything else?"

"Hang on, most of this is user manuals... Ah, yes, one more thing. I presume this is why you've brought that canister. Improved flash-generation field stabilisers. With this installed, your suit won't violently explode if you run out of charge. Seems you'll need to concentrate less on mentally maintaining the suit as well." Samus

raised her eyebrows.

"Now that is handy." There was only one thing she could imagine making this better. "One last question. The new plating..."

"Yes?"

"Does it come in orange?"

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Stepping out of the workshop in his new suit, the Chief felt almost like a new man. He was back in business. Ready for whatever the world threw at him. Aran seemed trustworthy enough, and with a little assistance, soon he'd be prepared for a solo career. From then on, he ought to be able to stand on his own two feet. Saving up for a ship of his own would be his first priority, then it was anything that took his fancy. Another ship. More tech. From what he'd heard, amour in this time was altered and improved on a modular basis by software updates and microhardware. That would make it relatively easy to update himself, stay on top of weapon developments-

Did he just think of the suit as part of himself? This was just what he was trying to avoid... He reached the entrance to the building, the doors sliding open for him. The wind blew over him, sensor reports from his suit informing him about temperature, wind speeds and the like. He trudged out and ignored the data. He wasn't fighting.

Maybe it hadn't been a good idea to go back into war. It was bringing up old habits that he'd now rather see forgotten. The thing was, he didn't want to leave it behind, though. He could have been any number of other things, from a manual labourer in a shipyard to a student in any degree that took his fancy. Instead, he heard the battle horns calling, and he had been drawn back. Back to his home.

He wouldn't let it define him, though. He was more than a soldier. He was an individual. He stood for what he believed in, even if he hadn't thought about those things all that much yet. He'd know when he saw them, he was reasonably sure. If not, then just go with what he felt. Hopefully his lucky streak hadn't burned out over the last three hundred years...

As he walked down the street towards the spaceport where Samus was supposedly waiting, he noticed he was getting a lot of looks. People were whispering to each other as he passed, taking covert pictures, or just watching him walk by. Given he was probably in history textbooks somewhere and the Ares looked very similar to the Mjolnir, it shouldn't have been surprising, but having largely slipped under the radar for the past week, it came as somewhat of a shock when he noticed a car was following him, floating along at ground level a few metres behind. When a spot appeared, it pulled over, opening up and spewing forth a dozen journalists, each backed by a floating camera drone. He growled softly. He hated cameras.

Instantly, they were upon him, back-pedalling furiously as he marched onwards, gabbling questions at him so fast they all melted into a single wall of sound. He tried to gently push them out of the way. If he stopped to talk, more would show up and then he'd be completely

screwed. But they persisted, and they persisted hard. The questions became more frantic, and some of them were sounding dangerously tabloid.

"How does the world today compare to the good old days?"

"Tell us about the evil you saw in the Federation council chambers!"

"Would you be interested in sponsoring a new line of arms?"

He really didn't want to be around them long. So he decided not to be.

Putting on a burst of speed, he slipped through a gap in the crowd, quickly leaving them in the dust. As he did, he pulled up a speedometer in the corner of his HUD. After all, it would be good to have a record of how well the suit performed without adjustment, wouldn't it?

He began to run, leaving the small crowd far behind him. As the suit amplified his movements and took the strain off his body, he relaxed into a steady rhythm, barely having to work. He glanced at the speed gauge. It read 20 m/s. Amazing for a normal person, perhaps, but nowhere near his personal record. The new suit was the perfect opportunity to set a new one. But to do that, he'd need a clear track...

He swerved off the pavement, vaulted over a parked car with a single leap, and hit the ground running. Most cars whizzed over his head, letting him run freely on the smooth road. He began to push harder, leaning forward and pumping his legs faster. He began to feel the strain, and his speed climbed to twenty-five. A bit more effort, and he was almost at thirty. The last time he had run at thirty metres per second he had torn his Achilles' tendon. Well, look at him now.

A grin broke out on his face as he pushed his body further, the suit matching him stride for stride, letting him go further. Muscles burning as the numbers inched up, a grin broke out on his face. This was faster than he'd ever gone under his own power. The backdrop whizzed through his field of vision too fast to even recognise, the only constant being the eternal highway. It was exhilarating.

Although he wanted to push himself more, he realised that the road would soon move exclusively into the air, which was not currently part of his repertoire. Plus, the spaceport was coming up soon.

He slowed, the burn in his muscles subsiding and his quickened breath stilling. Eventually, he stood on the empty Tarmac outside the spaceport, where the people were hurrying too much to care about his presence. He glanced down the road, seeing no pursuers, and walked in through the doors.

Being significantly taller than the majority of spaceport-goers, he found his way to Hangar 22 quite easily. Admittance was seemingly not a problem, a quick scan and he was allowed in. The doors slid open for him, revealing the Valkyrie. He grimaced. It wasn't exactly subtle. Sure, in space you stood out whatever colour your ship was,

but was being so... Vivid really necessary?

"Well, it keeps in with her theme." He thought to himself.

The ship seemed to notice him, humming to life. The green windshield shimmered and cleared, revealing Samus and the hologram of Adam. Samus was smiling, like a child with a new toy. Not so far from the truth. She spoke through the loudspeaker.

"Feast your eyes on your base of operations for the foreseeable future." The Chief was glad he was wearing his suit. She couldn't see him cringe. She tapped something on the console. "Welcome aboard." A beam swept over him, and in a flash of light he was in the cockpit. Samus was already at the door, prompting him to follow. What followed was the fastest tour in the history of the world.

"Your room, my room, bathroom, kitchen, engine, cargo, medbay. Got it?" The Master Chief blinked, still processing.

"...Yes."

"Good. Make yourself at home. It's thanks to you that they gave me this ship in the first place, so I can't exactly just make you cabin boy, but this is still my ship. Got that?"

"Noted."

"Good. Now, I think we should get into orbit before those paparazzi make it past the checkpoint guards."

"You saw-?"

"Yes. Adam likes hacking things. Nice running. Not a patch on me, mind."

"I..." But she was already gone, back into the cockpit. He blinked. She either didn't like him, or just expected him to be able to keep up. Which one it was was largely irrelevant, but he was stuck with her for now. No use whining.

He felt slightly warm, so in the interests of comfort, he ordered the suit away. It evaporated off him, leaving him in his undersuit. Something clattered to the ground behind him. The chip.

He turned and picked it up, cradling it in his hand. If this was going to stay intact it'd need a chain. Quickly popping into the room Samus had arbitrarily allocated him, he fished in the plywood chest of drawers. There was always... Aha. He drew out a metal dog tag chain. Looked like they still wore them, even now. Threading it through the chip's own hole, he clipped it around his neck. If it couldn't be plugged into his brain stem, it was going to be with him anyway.

Feeling assuaged, he returned to the cockpit, Samus barely paying attention to him as she performed pre-flight checks. He settled in the second chair, which creaked under him. Adam appeared next to him.

"It will be a pleasure workng with you, Master Chief. I'd shake your hand, but I haven't got one. All the same, welcome. Samus can take

some getting used to, but I'm sure you two will get along fine."

"Thank you, Commander Malkovich." The AI nodded, and the Master Chief scrutinised the controls before him. Despite the friendly demeanour, Adam... unsettled him. He brought up memories. Good ones, but the kind that remind one of something that he didn't wish to think about... Maybe he should have kept the suit on...

"I can run you through the controls if you like." Adam suggested, snapping him out of his descent into reminiscence. Good timing.

"Yes, that would be very helpful. Thank you."

"Too late now." Samus interrupted. "I've completed checks, and we have clearance to leave." She gripped the throttle, eyes narrowing. "Buckle up. I'm going to see what she can do..."

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Having taken the ship for a quick FTL spin around the local solar system, Samus seemed satisfied. She sat back in her seat, seemingly waiting for something. The Chief relaxed his grip on the armrests, face impressively passive. He looked over to her.

"What happens now?" She stretched, and put her arms behind her head.

"If you were on your own, a novice bounty hunter, I suppose you'd have a look at job listing boards or sites. Maybe hang around in a seedy bar somewhere looking for work. But with a reputation like mine..."

The console before them both pinged. Samus shot him a smug glance.

"All you have to do is wait." She sat forward and brought up the screen as a hologram in front of her. It showed a long list of job offers, each with a quick summary and a payment figure next to them. She studied it for a moment, then started discarding them.

"That's drug smuggling... That's terrorism... That's just boring... Ah... Yes. We're doing that one. Now." She flicked it over to him while she dialled up the contractor. He read it. An escort for a colony settlement party through a planet's magnetic storm region. Not exactly what he had expected... For a race called the Luminoth.

Not knowing this one, he made a quick search, unsurprised to see Samus' name all over their recent history. Thirteen feet tall on average, insectoid, highly intelligent and critically endangered. Apparently their planet had been a victim of a bizarre phenomenon, causing it to split in two. The new denizens of this twin world drove them to the brink, until Samus saved them. There were a lot of things he didn't understand written off-handedly into the articles, probably recent history. He'd need to read up on that later.

Samus had just reached the contractor. The face of a Luminoth filled the screen in front of her, and a discussion of the mission had

begun.

"I'm glad you chose to help us with this, Miss Aran. We need to build new colonies, or else risk extinction. This is one of the only suitable areas we have found."

"I'm glad to help. As is my new associate. I trust there is no problem with an extra set of hands?"

"Of course not. Any friend of yours is a friend of ours. In fact, were it not for your friends at the Galactic Federation, we never would have found this planet! They have been most helpful in setting up this expedition. Some helpers are still with us now!" Samus smiled, but there was a small forcedness to it.

"Then I suppose we've both received assistance. Could you transfer the coordinates? We'll be there imminently."

"Of course. There. Once again- What is it, Roberts?" John craned his neck to see more of the screen. A human had come into view, minute compared to the towering mothlike alien. He was dressed practically, probably an aid worker sent by the Federation to assist with the settlement. He looked worried.

"Sir, um..." Upon closer inspection, he was very worried. A thin sheen of sweat clung to his skin, and if it wasn't just a resolution error, he was shaking ever so slightly. "We've got three ships hailing us. They just came down from orbit. Space Pirate markings. They're asking for you." The Luminoth leader stiffened, and quickly looked back to Samus, looking grim.

"Miss Aran, I'm afraid we have no capacity to resist them. We possess only minimal armaments and no combat harnesses. We have no choice but to surrender. If we are fortunate enough to be held hostage, a rescue would be greatly appreciated." She nodded.

"You can count on me- Us." She quickly corrected. She wasn't used to working as part of a team.

"Thank you. The area's magnetic storms should mask your ship's descent. Also, you may wish to approach our camp from the North-East. There are several vantage points and plenty of foliage to mask your movements."

"Got it. We'll be there soon." The line closed and the holographic screen disappeared. Samus took the wheel again, eyes forward, and began the FTL startup sequence. Since it was in a straight line this time, the acceleration was considerably less violent. Once they were cruising, Adam took control of the ship, guiding them toward the impending battle. John spoke up.

"Space Pirates?" Samus nodded.

"As odd as it sounds, that's what they call their species. They're nomadic, and highly aggressive. Used to all work as a single conglomerate under a circle of leaders, but I killed most of them. Now they're in disarray, fractured, so you don't see them as much. Unusual to see them this close to the galactic centre, but that doesn't matter now. All you need to know to fight them is that they're vicious, use a lot of biotechnology to modify themselves, so

expect to see a lot of different shapes and sizes, and most wield cannibalised Federation arms." She continued staring ahead. "Why they want a fledgling colony is beyond me, though..."

"Is it important? We kill them, we scare them off, we make sure the Federation gives the colony an AA gun when they finish setting up. Until then, send a few marines." Samus shrugged.

"Sure. Honestly, though, it's probably just because they're Luminoth. Pretty advanced technology. Too bad they left it all on Aether to start afresh."

"They should have at least taken a big gun."

"Probably." They lapsed into silence, staring out through the windscreen as the stars raced by them. Then John spoke up.

"One more thing."

"What is it?"

"Space Pirates."

"What about them?"

"What part do I shoot?" Samus grinned sadistically.

"The head works for me."

"Doesn't it always?"

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After decelerating, they made a slow, undisturbed descent through the planet's atmosphere. The Luminoth leader had been right. Adam remarked that he could barely see two feet in front of him, the magnetic fields were so bad.

Quickly armouring and arming up, Adam hid the ship in a small patch of forest, the two warriors teleporting down to the ground, landing on the yellow, dusty dirt. Surveying the landscape, the area looked arid. The trees around them were gnarled and shrivelled, hardened by hardship, roots dug deep into the soil to soak up anything that might still remain. The sky was even an odd green. Definitely an untamed world.

They moved quickly and quietly, heading towards the given coordinates. The Pirates hadn't been on the surface long, so they hadn't set up patrols. If they were lucky, there wouldn't even be snipers around. Soon, they reached the cliff the leader had mentioned, and lay on their fronts, heads over the edge, looking down over the encampment.

It didn't look very good. The original camp had consisted of only a few tents and a large transport vehicle for the building materials, but it now was joined by three small, ugly, brown-black gunships. Each looked big enough to hold perhaps half a dozen crewmembers, quite some of which were patrolling the paths between the tents. Ominous patches of blood dotted the ground.

The Chief took a moment to observe the Pirates more closely. Zooming in on one, then another, it was clear they partook in a lot of bioenhancement procedures. Each looked different from the next, sometimes quite drastically. One would have a blue carapace, with twin pincers each concealing a beam weapon, and the next would be a sickly brown, fleshy and with small grasping hands closed around a rifle. From the way they interacted, it seemed their idea of a promotion would be being allowed to grow an extra arm.

Samus nudged the Chief, pointing at the largest tent.

"If the colonists haven't been killed and dumped in the river already, they'll be interrogating them there. I say you stay up here while I covertly kill as many of them as possible, and if they spot me, you open fire." The Chief frowned under his helmet. He wasn't used to having to take such a small role.

"Why you?"

"None of my weapons operate efficiently at this range, and I have a brand new active camouflage unit and energy machete I want to test. I imagine you'd like to do the same with whatever that thing is." She nodded to the Hephaestus on his hip. "And if the GF thinks that's all you need to kill anything you want at any range, who am I to judge?"

The Chief reigned himself in. It wasn't unreasonable for her to suggest this plan. She was better equipped for infiltration, and him for covering fire, which was what the situation called for. It would also give him the opportunity to observe her and the Pirates' fighting styles, which might prove life-saving later, without being forced to adapt too fast. So he nodded.

"Alright." He drew the Hephaestus from his hip, the shards springing out into a bulky, long-barrelled sniper rifle. The inherent glow of the Hardlight faded at his command, more suited to the scenario, and he tore up some foliage to act as makeshift camo. He took aim, training his gaze on the ground below.

"Go." She shimmered and disappeared, the only mark of her passing being a small impression in the dust. A small ripple slid down the cliff, dislodging a few pebbles, but drawing no attention. The op was live.

Samus quickly went to work, skirting around the tents and ships. Her camo unit would only last for a few minutes, and it only worked on optical wavelengths- she was plain as day to a heat-vision visor. Thus, it was vital to thin the numbers as much as possible, as quickly as possible, while avoiding the gaze of anyone with an advanced-looking helmet. Her first victim was a low-ranking grunt. He had no visible augmentations, wore basic combat plating, and had dropped his gun to sit on a rock and sharpen his protruding teeth. He'd just finished the first incisor when Samus' new blade hissed over his throat, cleanly ending his life. She dumped the body behind a nearby bush, scattering some dirt over it to reduce thermal visibility. She slunk over to the next tent, and was about to round the corner when a hushed bark sounded in her ear.

"Stop." The commanding tone made even her, so notorious for disobeying orders, instinctually comply.

"What!?" She hissed back at him. "I've only got a few more minutes!"

"Sniper up on a rock crest. Stealth suit. Looking in your direction. Smart-link headset." Samus took a breath. Good call on his part.

"Take the sh-" There was a barely perceptible flash, so quick and condensed that she might have missed it were it not for the data her suit was constantly feeding her.

"Done. Body fallen behind the rock. Proceed." She did, but couldn't help feeling slightly peeved. No matter how subtle, there was a command conflict here. He was used to giving orders, and she was used to not taking any. It was technically her bounty, but there'd be a cold day in hell before she would use that as an excuse to take charge. She reserved her right to drunkenly badmouth the federation at any bar she chose to do so at, and being a control freak would impede that. No hypocrisy.

Two Zebesians were playing at target practice with a crate of bottles, setting them up and nailing them neatly with their integrated weapons. One sweep of her arm and their heads came away from their unshielded bodies, all four parts quickly dumped in a ditch.

"Any more contacts outside?" She spoke into the radio.

"One more sniper. Unaware. Appears to be-" He paused. "Urinating." He was not amused. Another silent flash went off. "You are clear to enter the tents." Samus nodded and activated the X-Ray visor.

Both of the smaller tents were empty, from the looks of it, their occupants moved into the bigger, central one. Through the thick tarpaulin, Samus spied on the assortment of skeletal figures. There were a lot of them to say the least. One huge cluster in the corner was probably the captured Luminoth and aid workers, whilst the dozen or so sitting around, sneering and circling the pile were probably the Pirates. She noticed one of them, hanging back, had a more bulked-out figure under the visor. Dense armour. The leader, by her guess. Taking him out would be a good start, throw them into disarray. But if the hostages were still nearby they'd just grab them, hold them at gunpoint, and she wouldn't be able to touch them. She needed them out in the open.

"Chief. Change of plans." She whispered into the comm. "I need to lure them out. Destroy the ships."

"Roger." Back up on the cliff, the Hephaestus had already reformed into a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher, long and tubular. Three short, slowly rotating barrels protruded from the front, in each a package of high-energy electromagnetic death. A targeting window slid out from the side, targeting key weak points on each ship. As the weapon calculated the trajectories, he glanced at the toll three heavy-yield rockets were going to take on his power levels. Apparently, they didn't come cheap. He'd have no ammo for at least thirty seconds afterwards. That meant Samus would have to pull her weight for the time being. The window flashed. Locked on and ready. "Going loud."

The three projectiles erupted from the launcher with an energetic crackle, curving off gracefully through the air to their respective targets. Each flew, a sparking ball of orange fury, straight into an engine, exploding with a deafening boom. The ships were torn apart, shrapnel raining down like hail all around them. Samus neatly dodged a large section of hull that saw fit to try and crush her.

Within seconds, the entire cohort was out in the open, scrambling over the yellow dust to the burning wrecks of their only way off the planet. The leader, clad in his thick plating, face sharp and jagged, was snarling at the scene.

"Find the one who did this!" He shrieked, his underlings happily obliging, beginning to scatter. Samus, on the other hand, was ready to pounce. A minute left on her timer, her blade at the ready, she crept up behind the commander...

And then it all went wrong. A big, red ERROR banner flashed up on her HUD, the camouflage timer flickering through innumerable combinations of random numbers before dying completely. Bringing up her arm, she saw she was no longer invisible. On the contrary, she was glowing bright blue, forked lines running all over her shields. The colour quickly died, but it hadn't gone unnoticed. The Pirates wheeled around, pointing and screeching her name, weapons whining and priming as they brought them to bear.

No cover, surrounded, and outnumbered. Time to bust a move.

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The woman was an animal.

Looking down on the fight from his perch through the scope of the Hephaestus, it occurred to the Master Chief that if anyone else were down there in the same situation, he would have leapt into the fray already. Right now, he didn't feel the need to, content to sit and watch another professional at work.

The way she moved was almost surreal, seemingly at odds to the laws of physics. When the first shots had been fired at her, she had leapt high into the air, spinning like a top, a missile shooting out and splattering one pirate over the dirt. She hit the ground, rolled into her odd spherical form, and whirled around, barreling into the legs of another, simultaneously dropping a bomb to finish it. The motions were so quick, so fluid. Every movement flowed into the next, neatly avoiding fire and retaliating tenfold. Rolling up onto her feet, she cut another Pirate's legs out from under him, finishing the job with a shot to the head before the rest of his body even hit the floor.

The Pirates had gotten a proper bead on her now, though, and the fire came thick and fast. Beam shots rained down on her, most not even touching her as she vaulted through the air, charging a shot and blasting another Pirate's head clean away. She never stopped moving, the few shots that did impact merely plinking harmlessly off her shields, and took one pirate out at a time with sustained beam fire, explosives or the machete.

Their numbers dwindling, the Pirates panicked. One pounced on Samus' back, only to be promptly torn off, slammed on the ground and receiving a crushing boot to the throat for his trouble. Another tried to flee, a missile impacting the small of his back. A lumbering brute of a creature swung at her with a scythe-like growth on his arm, which she neatly ducked, following up with an ice beam to the gut and a brutal fist to shatter him into shards. One threw a grenade, expertly lashed with her grapple beam and swung back on its master, connecting with his head and detonating.

Whilst interested in the display, the Chief noticed motion on the side through the scope of his rifle. The leader, having survived this long, began to back away as his minions fought the Hunter. He made to duck back into the tent, the Chief quickly targeting him and pulling the trigger, only for the gun to fizzle sadly, a notification popping up on his HUD that he was about to divert shield energy to weapons. It didn't matter anyway. He'd missed the opportunity. He ought to tell Samus.

"Samus, the leade--"

"Busy!" She snapped as she smashed a pirate in the face with her cannon, following up with a blade thrust to the neck. The last Pirate was behind her, and she spun to face it. It had drawn its sidearm, and pointed it at its own head. It growled something unintelligible, and shot itself in the head, saving itself the disgrace of being killed by his race's enemy. Fine by her. She then responded, "Okay, what?"

"The leader went into--"

"Stop! Lower your weapon, Hunter!" The snarls came from inside the largest tent, the flaps quickly parting to reveal the Pirate leader, a pistol in one hand and a small man wrapped up in the other arm. "Or the runt gets it..."

It was the same man from the call to the leader. No mistaking it. He was sweating and bedraggled, and fruitlessly clawing at the Pirate's exoskeleton in a futile attempt to escape. The Pirate was employing him well as a shield. Even if she managed to get her cannon or grapple up in time, there was a high chance that she'd hit him instead of the Pirate. Observing the alien more closely, he was almost as worked up as his captive. He was twitchy. Nervous. Could pull the trigger at the slightest provocation, intentionally or not. This was bad. The man probably wasn't going to make it out alive...

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Back up on the cliff, the Chief observed the situation. He had ammo again now, and had the Pirate's head in his sights.

"Aran. I can take a shot now if needed." As the Pirate rattled off instructions on what they were all going to do next, she whispered into the comm:

"Negative. The target is too jumpy. You'd kill the hostage too." She turned her attention back to the Pirate.

"Were you listening?! I said take off the armour, now!" Samus was

startled. There was no way she was doing that, not even with covering fire. She wasn't faster than a bullet.

"Back off and strafe to your right." The Chief's voice sounded in her ear again. "Slowly. I need a better angle."

"No, I said-"

"Trust me." That was a new one. Trust was something that didn't come easily to her, or to him. But at the moment, the best case scenario was that she took the shot and the worker got off with severe bleeding, third degree burns, and a broken neck. She might as well let him try.

"Alright..." She said, both into the comm and to the Pirate. She began to back away, moving ever so subtly to her right. The Pirate turned to follow her, putting him in line with the cliff.

"Stop. That's fine." The Chief said. "Now, stall." She began to talk slowly to the Pirate, attempting pathetic reasoning. Up on the cliff, John cranked up the scope magnification on his rifle. This was a long shot, literally, but it might work. He needed to hit a very particular spot at long range, using a weapon he'd only fired twice before. The Pirate was directly opposite him, the pistol in its grip directly across from him. He lined up the shot, aiming carefully. Not at the Pirate, but at the pistol's barrel...

He took a deep breath, and the flash lit up the barrel again.

The effects were immediate. The shot hit the pistol's barrel, jerking it in the Pirate's grip and pushing it into a ridge in the alien's neck plating. The twitchy hostage-taker squeezed the trigger, and shot himself in the throat. Choking on his own blood, he fell back, his prisoner tearing free and throwing himself to the ground. Samus didn't hesitate to finish the job with one well-placed shot. The Pirate gurgled and fell.

Samus bent down to the man whilst the Chief scanned the area for remaining hostiles.

"You alright?"

"Y-yeah, I th-think so..." The man stuttered as she helped him up. He glanced over to the burning wrecks of the Pirate gunships. "A-are they all dead?" Samus gave the area a quick sweep with the X-Ray visor, seeing nothing. Better get the opinion of the eye in the sky, though.

"Master Chief?"

"Can't see any more."

"Good enough. If any did escape, there'll be two or three at most. Adam?"

"Yes, Samus?"

"You did call for Federation reinforcements?"

"Yes. A squad is on its way here to reinforce the convoy, as well as

a frigate to find and eliminate any nearby Pirate bases of operation."

"Excellent." She turned back to the man next to her. "Now, let's see to the rest of you..."

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She'd freed the prisoners, to a rapport of cheers and thanks, as the Chief made his way slowly down the hill. As the Luminoth leader and Samus talked about what to do next, he began checking the Space pirate bodies. It wouldn't do to have him in there anyway. He wasn't the public face of this team.

Team? Ha. Not much of one. They barely cooperated. It was equally his and her fault, and he couldn't really blame her. She probably didn't blame him either. Now the fight was over and done, he understood a little more about the combat standards of the time, and he was thankful to her for the opportunity, even if it hadn't been her initiative. It was still better that he work less publicly, even if he did want to accrue a bounty hunter reputation. The general public would probably appreciate the sentiment of the ancient war hero stoically continuing to fight evil, rather than just being a bloodthirsty gun for hire with more ammo than he knew what to do with.

Having checked the bodies for clues of their motivation, he scooped up the relevant bits and pieces and began piling the bodies in a ditch. Make it easier for whoever got to bury them eventually. He sat down on a rock and sifted through the written notes, PDA's and audio logs. His suit's translator came in handy. There wasn't much to go on, but it looked like they were after the Luminoth alive, and were going to try bartering with their homeworld for tech. No conspiracy to be found.

"And is this the colleague you mentioned?" The Chief looked up from the items to see Samus and the Luminoth leader before him, the rest of the convoy filing out to fix the camp up.

"Indeed it is." She replied to the alien. John stood up, and the leader bowed his head.

"As I was just saying to Miss Aran, we are eternally thankful for your help. Had you not come by, who knows what fate might have befallen us..." Looking up at the giant moth-creature, the Chief held out the PDA he had been studying. "From what I can tell from the contents of their pockets, they wanted to ransom you on Aether for weapons technology. Seems to be an isolated group as well. If the Federation finds their base and clears it out, you shouldn't have to worry about it happening again." The sage leant down to pluck the proffered device from his hand, and studied it for a moment.

"Ah, yes, I see. That's reassuring to know. And thank you for cleaning up, as well. We in this group are mostly farmers, scientists and humanitarians. Not soldiers. I doubt most of us could stomach dealing with... Bodies." He shivered and continued. "Anyway, I have told Miss Aran that your job here is complete. With the Federation arriving shortly to facilitate our escort, you can turn your attentions to wherever they are needed. You've done more than enough here. Potentially saved a species from extinction, for one!" The

Chief nodded.

"You're welcome."

"Indeed." There was a rumbling sound overhead, and two dropships in Federation colours flew over the camp. They had arrived.

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"So, how did you enjoy your first mission?" Samus asked him, when they were back in orbit, winding down and unarmoured.

"Not bad, even for a back seat ride." She raised an eyebrow at him and sat down in her seat, pulling up a hologram in front of her.

"You'll get your chance, don't worry. But for now, we have some down time before our next job. And for me, that means only one thing." The Chief glanced at the coordinates she was keying into the navigation system nervously.

"And what's that?" He asked. She finished entering the coordinates and grabbed the wheel.

"Time to drink ourselves into oblivion."

Samus' driving wasn't the only thing that made him grip the armrests in fear this time.

**And there we go. Again, I'm so, so sorry about how late this is coming out. I'm afraid I can't promise regular updates for a little while now, guys, so I hope you liked this one to keep you going long enough until I can get back into the zone. If not, feel free to suggest an improvement. I'd be more than happy to take it into consideration.
**

**Oh, yes, and the winner of last chapter's Reference race is Hazzamo. Congratulations! (#) Very fast, I must say. More than anyone can say for me... **

Now, before I go, it's time to respond to your feedback!

Hazzamo: All will be revealed in good time... *more evil laughter*

silversliced-rain: There you are. Just a bit-part, I know, but I hope it was enjoyable.

** : It appears to have gone right over my head. :/
Sorry.**

Gonstika: Sort of, but in a Metroid style. Shinier, and more coverage, more like a hardsuit than bits of armour clamped on.

**TheAccursedHunter01: Firstly, the Federation are treating the Chief with all this courtesy and such because he's a big historical figure. History can be a powerful PR tool, particularly with wars, and that's

why they think he'd have been valuable if he'd joined them. I'm not saying Samus isn't a major figure in their eyes, just that she's less valuable in that particular respect, since she often goes cavorting off to do whatever she likes. She'll do the whole shooty-shooty savey-worldy thing on her own whether they want her to or not, but there was a secondary agenda with the Chief. That's all.**

Secondly, the only reason she was squishy at first was because of the degraded tanks. (Admittedly, I did make it up as a plot device, but hey, there's got to be some reason they all disappear every game...) With new ones now, she can take a lot more punishment at once than the Chief, but lacks survivability in an extended firefight if evasion is difficult. I think that pretty much balances it.

Anonymous: I agree, fanboyism can be annoying if it's unalloyed. People are allowed to like things, just don't assert they win at everything. For example, I really like Pokemon, but I don't assert Pikachu could beat Superman at arm-wrestling. Quite a few decently written crossovers I've seen around have been ruined by an unbalanced view of things, but eh, what can you do. :) As for Hardlight, yeah, not much sense there. From the little lore I've dredged up on it, it has been described as exotic matter by Bungie, (which as an amateur physicist I can say is utter rubbish) and as a condensed photon state by 343, (which makes a bit more sense). Apparently this means it transfers its kinetic energy, then converts back into photons for heat and light energy transfer, which again makes little sense. In terms of interplay with shields, though, it shouldn't cause much of an issue. Halo and Metroid shields seem to react to melee and weapons fire similarly, so I assume they work the same way here, even Hardlight ones. Apart from Metroids and the weirdly intangible X, if it's dangerous, it should bounce off. :)

Burst of Inspiration: Noted. Thanks for the tip!

masterart: Ah. Right. It appears I forgot to mention that fic was on hiatus until this part of the trilogy is done. Sorry about that. I'll wrap this up first, hopefully won't take too long, and buckle down.

PICH21: Possibly, and no. Glad you're enjoying it!

Ghysu: Sorry, I'm here now. Wasn't looking for ideas, just time to write.

Exanime Draco: Thanks so much for the praise! It is a shame that this is a small section, but there are indeed a few gems. As for the Prophets/Brutes thing, it has been about three hundred years. If a lot can happen in four, imagine what can happen in three hundred. :) Plus, Titus was meant to sort of be an isolated case. The majority of them are still running around on Doisac hitting each other with sticks. He's a bit more cultured than the rest. Anyway, glad to have you with us!

Okay, hope that you enjoyed, and if we're lucky, the next chapter won't be too far in the future! So long!

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 11****

The ship once again decelerated, and John relaxed. He took a breath and rubbed his eyes. Old slipspace jumping was so much easier on the occupants than this new stuff. Or maybe he just had to get used to it...

He looked out at the planet they were now approaching, surprised to see a familiar sight. Reach.

Unlike the last time he'd seen it, it was lush and green, a stark contrast to the whole continents of flat, scorched glass he had left behind.

He was back at the place where he had become a Spartan. Where they had trained, changed and died, and not just at the Covenant's hands. Samus set the ship to descend and noticed him staring. Then she remembered his file.

"Memories?" He didn't reply. "I'll take that as a yes." She flicked a screen towards him. "We're doing a pest control job for some big mining company. But the meet is tomorrow, so I'm going out and getting blasted." He glanced at it briefly then went back to looking at Reach.

"Pest control?" He offered.

"Big pests." She countered. He didn't reply, and she got up and left for her cabin. He stayed in his seat, watching the planet get closer. He wasn't sure whether the sight, or the prospect of returning to Reach made him happy or sad. He had... Mixed memories of the place. Lots of pain, death and suffering, but also comradeship, self-improvement and order. It had made him who he was today.

That in turn raised the question of whether or not he wanted to be who he was today, which depressed him no end. Maybe alcohol was a good idea. He'd never tried it before, but he'd have had to be deaf to not have heard about its recreational uses. And given how big he was, it might not hit him that badly. Drown his troubles a little.

He got up and headed back to his cabin before he started thinking about things too much again. Keep moving, don't stop and mope...

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As Samus changed into some civilian clothes for the brief evening's foray into the world of ethanol derivatives, John tried to make something passable from the few garments he'd found hanging in the wardrobe. A vest and jogging bottoms wouldn't pass for every occasion. Luckily, he managed to scrape together an outfit with a jacket to cover the unseemly bits. He made a note to buy some more clothes whilst groundside. The Federation had set up a secure bank account for him, with Samus transferring his cut of each job directly into it. In this day and age, most purchases were dealt with digitally, not so differently to his own time, but with the added oddity of coins being replaced with chits, bits of disposable plastic pre-loaded with a set amount of credits. Bounty hunting clearly paid

well, so a few clothes for situations such as this wouldn't go amiss.

The Valkyrie passed through customs without a hitch, Adam having the invaluable skill to fill out reams of paperwork in less than a second. She touched down in a small city's spaceport, the sky already darkening, and Samus started the well-practised route to her favourite place in the area, the Chief trailing behind.

Walking out of the port into the cool night air, still following in Samus' wake, he wondered how the planet's cities still looked so similar after a glassing and complete reconstruction. This being a small town, it was filled with small, circular homes, like a hut, all constructed with modern materials. The population looked the same too, mostly Eastern European humans, though a few aliens could be seen around now. The neighbourhood walked the line between the air of the country and urbanity, there being a lot of farmland on the outskirts, whereas here were the shops, market squares and-

Oh, yes. Bars.

Samus stopped outside the predetermined destination, a dingy-looking place with an ancient neon sign and mirrored glass in the shop window. If the sign, (and Samus' presumed integrity) hadn't declared it as a bar, it might as well have been something much less reputable. She pushed through the door and went inside, him standing outside for a moment before following suit.

The interior was open enough, but felt slightly cramped. The main bar lined the right side, while a few tables dotted the remaining space. The walls and floor were wood-panelled, the floor light and the walls dark, quite at odds with the chrome-finish bar. There were a few patrons, but they hadn't looked up at the new arrivals. Two at the back were playing cards. It said local, it said low budget, it said understated. Just the sort of place a galactic celebrity like Samus would go to relax.

She sauntered up to the bar and took a seat. The bartender came up and a few words were exchanged as John made his way up. He took few bottles off the shelves behind him, pulled out a pint glass from under the bar, and sloshed the various liquids together haphazardly, dropping in a few ice cubes at the end. No bells and whistles. Must be refreshing if people are always talking up to you.

He sat down as well, and the bartender glanced at him as well, wrinkling his caterpillar moustache.

"Eh, and what'd you like, big man?" A quick glance over the wall of different drinks made him realise he was utterly, completely and resolutely in over his head here. Sipping her drink, Samus smirked.

"Never drunk before, Chief? Might as well start smallish. Get him a pint of bitter." She said to the barman. He shrugged and pulled out another glass, filled it from a tap and set it down in front of him. He picked it up as others might pick up roadkill, and took a tentative sip. It wasn't unpleasant. Oddly bittersweet. He drank some more. "Easy, tiger." Samus warned. "Easy to bite off more than you can chew with this stuff." He set it down.

"So, why Reach?" He asked. She shrugged, swilling her own drink.

"It's a nice place. Quiet places like this for relaxing, big places like New New Alexandria for work. Not too cold either."

"Don't like the cold?" Samus opened her mouth, then stopped, thought a second and pre-emptively corrected herself.

"I guess you could say it's a genetic thing." He shrugged back, knocking back some more of his own drink. "What about you? I know you trained here, has it changed much?"

"No. Surprising, since it was burned into a ball of molten glass just before I left."

"Ouch."

"Yes. We both know what it's like to watch a home burn." She didn't respond.

They drank some more, in silence. Ordered refills. John picked something different this time. Something a bit stronger. The silence continued.

"..."

"..."

"Yeah. I suppose we do."

"Sorry. I shouldn't have--"

"I shouldn't have brought it up in the first place. Let's change the subject."

"To what?"

"Anything. Let's ramble. I'll start. The Human Councillor's a right bastard, isn't he?" John snorted.

"You resent him that much for dumping me on you?" You could just about figure out that he was joking.

"You saved lives that I probably wouldn't have been able to on my own back there. That's worth it in my book."

"Hm. And I appreciate the hand. I could do without the driving though."

"Excuse me?"

The conversation meandered slowly along, never settling on any topic for very long. As time past and more alcohol flowed into their glasses and past their lips, they both eased. Intoxication is a bonding experience.

About half an hour down the line, Samus cut through the slight mist she was seeing through for a moment and took a look at her drinking buddy. At the number of glasses in front of him. At the tilt in his

slouch, the slur in his speech, the clutching hand at his neck chain. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to bring him along... Or she could have just kept a closer eye on him.

"Okay, I think you've had enough. Time to head back. Long day tomorrow." He shook his head and finished his current bottle, adding it to the collection before him.

"Nahhh..." He slurred. Samus was regretting this more and more by the second. She didn't even know if he could walk. Was there a taxi service in the ar-?

The front door swung open, bumping against the wall and attracting everyone's attention. Three non-local looking men walked in, wearing leather jackets, hip holsters and the kind of smile that said "No matter how much you may enjoy punching me in the face, it won't be worth it when I'm done." They sauntered up to the bar and started ordering drinks. Expensive ones.

By. The. Second.

One of the new trio moved in on the card game. From the look on their faces, he wasn't welcome, but the two locals lacked a choice. Worse still, another one sat down next to Samus, on the opposite side to John. She really, really didn't need this right now.

"Hey sugar..." He started. She cut him off immediately with one of her personal favourites.

"The last guy who said something along those lines to me left with only three of his five limbs still attached. You may not be so lucky." But the man was not perturbed.

"Oh, come on." He sighed. "No need to get like that. I'm just trying to-"

"You won't be getting anywhere, so I suggest you don't waste your breath." That, apparently, was a wrong move. Rather than giving up, the man pushed harder.

"You don't know that." He pressed on. "I could-"

"No you couldn't." Another bad one. The situation was making her tense. That, combined with the alcohol was stopping her from taking the smart route out.

And apparently it was too late for that particular exit anyway, as he then pulled his gun out.

"You aren't calling this one, Pumpkin." The last word was spat through gritted teeth. She'd pushed too hard. This was the price she paid for walking around with her Paralyser concealed rather than on display...

She sobered up, as did seemingly everyone else. The few original patrons looked terrified. The man's friends looked amused at their friend's quick resort to extreme measures. The bartender looked on in dread. John looked down into his drink. She took a moment to analyse the situation as best she could. Her Paralyser was in her pocket. She could whip it out pretty fast, but not fast enough to stop him firing

if he figured out what she was doing. That, and he was holding a real gun, not a stun weapon. It was cheap, low quality and probably couldn't make a round even last long enough to reach the end of a firing range, but it was still deadly here. In normal combat she could destroy him without even trying, but this was the big obstacle. He had it over the bar, elbow resting on the surface, pointed at her. If she redirected it, it could hit John. Or even start an alcohol fire. The best option seemed to be comply until an opportunity arose, then make him pay dearly...

She was about to stand up when a thick arm groped over the table in front of her. John's hand. He was almost face down asleep at this point, but seemed to want to be useful. He felt around a little until he found the gun, its owner looking on at the inebriated display with a sneer. The hand slowly reared up and grabbed the barrel of the pistol. The man shook it, seeking to dislodge the drunken appendage. It didn't budge.

With a creaking sound, the hand tightened. The blue plastic casing of the gun cracked, electronics sparking, and the internal metal parts squeaking. Half a dozen sets of eyes widened as the barrel was slowly reduced to cracked plastic and warped metal on the table, the remaining handle giving a few bleeps before whining the inactivity tone. A few jaws went slack.

Samus didn't care about the spectacle. You got used to things like it in her line of work. Nice distraction though.

With her left hand, she swung an underhand hammer into the aggressor's balls, the right simultaneously drawing the Paralyser. As the man fell, cursing, off his chair, she span around and nailed him with a pre-charged stun blast. He lay on the floor, twitching. The next man ducked, flipped a table and dove behind it, soon popping out to fire a few shots with it. Samus dodged circled around him and hit him with another blast, knocking him out as well.

The third popped out of his own improvised cover and fired a few shots, whizzing past Samus' head and forcing her to take cover. The man pressed on, keeping up the suppressive fire, Samus unable to poke her head out from behind the reinforced table for long. She was just about to chance it, when there was a sound of shattering glass, and a thump as something hit the floor. No more shots sounded. She stood, and saw her assailant on the floor, a gash on his head and surrounded by a halo of glass shards. Above him stood (or what was probably his best attempt at standing) John, with a broken bottle in hand. He dropped it and fumbled in his pocket, pulling out a chit and squinting at it, before throwing it at the bartender. It bounced awkwardly off the counter and fell on the floor. The worker scooped it up, looked at the printed number on the front, and waved at the door. They were covered.

John took one step and fell flat on his face. Sighing, Samus leant down to pull him to his feet, draping his arm over her shoulders to help support his weight. It was going to be a long walk back to the ship...

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When they entered the hangar after almost twenty minutes of stumbling, cursing and drunken mumbles, Adam granted them a small

mercy and beamed them aboard immediately. They materialised back in the cockpit, where John, nearly unconscious at this point, immediately slumped into his chair.

"Oh no you don't..." Muttered a now thoroughly grumpy Samus. This had not been her idea of a pleasant night out. She had hoped to go, have a few drinks, get pleasantly buzzed with some cheerful banter to accompany it, and come back. Admittedly, she had gotten those things, but she'd also gotten hit on, shot at, and forced to near-carry a drunken sap through the streets home, in the cold. That kind of ruined it.

She dragged him out of his seat and through the door, a bemused Adam watching the display. Practically kicking the door down, she flung him in, only taking a moment to arrange him so he wouldn't drown in his own vomit if he was sick. With that, she turned tail and-

"Samus...?"

She sighed. Turned around. Barely lucid, pupils dilated and limbs limp, he stared sadly at the wall.

"What?" She asked. He didn't say anything for the longest time.

"What... What do you do..." He appeared to be fighting for consciousness. "When you lose someone?"

What? She'd seen a lot of people die. So had he. What he was saying didn't make sense. And moreover, who was he talking about? They hadn't let anyone die. He carried on.

"When it's... Someone you were meant to... Take care of... And you just... Can't." In a second, she put it all together. The chip on his neck chain. The blue glow back on the wreck. His AI. Rampancy.

She paused for a moment. How to answer? He might not even remember in the morning, but she felt obliged to give a proper answer. She thought of how she had felt after losing Adam. After losing the Baby. Times she had been powerless to stop someone making a sacrifice for her.

"You accept it." She started. "Then you make sure it never happens again. You fight twice as hard, twice as brutal, and keep what matters to you safe."

He made an awkward spluttering noise that was probably a distorted laugh. Then his eyes closed, and his head fell back. Samus left the room.

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In the morning, Samus sat in the bridge, idly talking with Adam about the upcoming mission. The BXR mining conglomerate wanted a family of Guta cleared out of their main shaft. Adam had brought up a hologram and was detailing it to her as she ate a freeze-dried breakfast packet. Fifteen feet tall. Bulletproof skin. Sharp tusks. Arms that could flip trucks. Looked like it was going to be a fun day.

That was if the Chief hadn't died overnight. If he didn't wake up on his own soon, she was going to have to wake him up herself. And it would not be done with mercy.

Rest assured though, he woke up not a minute later. Quite loudly. A quiet rumble that barely reached the other end of his cabin quickly morphed into a loud, drawn-out groan as more of his brain became aware of the last night's damage. Samus heard it even through the reinforced doors, and couldn't resist a snort. It grew until it was almost making the ship vibrate, then died down, probably as the source realised that making more noise was only making it worse. Five minutes later, he stumbled through the door to the bridge and collapsed into his seat, a bottle of water and another breakfast package clutched tightly in his hands.

"Morning." Samus grinned. He groaned and tore the packet open, pulling out the dehydrated solid, and gulping it down almost angrily. Samus finished her own meal and decided to poke some fun. "So, how did you enjoy your first night out?"

"Enjoyable. But not worth it." He grunted.

"Pace yourself next time. You're a bit of a lightweight. Not literally, that is, but... Never mind." She shook her head at his slightly confused expression and looked back to the holographic display. She touched it with a finger and swiped up, enlarging it so it filled the bridge. "Anyway, we're clearing a family of these out of a mineshaft today. Not as glamorous as yesterday, but it could be fun."

"I've seen one of these before. They're tough."

"Maybe so, but we shouldn't have too much of a problem." He humphed an affirmation.

There were a few moments of silence as they cleared up their rubbish and made to go and get ready. As the corridor split between their two routes, John stopped for a second, Samus being forced to also do so by the narrow corridor.

"What is it?" She asked. He just stood there for a second, hand at his neck.

"Thanks for the advice, Samus." He murmured, and stepped through his doorway.

**And there we have it! I hope you weren't kept waiting too long this time! As you can see, Chief ain't no Captain America or Deadpool when it comes to alcohol. Yup. Total lightweight. **

In any case, I'm just going to let you all know that I only have a few more chapters planned for this fic. After that, I'll cap it off for a while whilst I work on something else that has been on hiatus for too long. After finishing that, I'll jump right back in here, and then the real adventure can begin, with part two!

As a side note, I finally got my hands on the Metroid Prime Trilogy! No one can deny that the graphics are a bit dated, but the gameplay is great! I would kill for a fast travel network though...

****But, first and foremost, replies!****

****Ghysu: As you can see, yes he can. XD****

****Hazzamo: Not... Quite that outlandish. Though that would be a sight to behold. ;) ****

****Reader: Not quite. I'll be going more for mutual respect than mutual admiration in the coming chapters.****

****TheEliteDucky: Nope. XD****

****Dragonskyt: There isn't a great amount to work with on that front, so I may have improvised a bit. Even the wiki agrees her personality greatly depends on the media's writer. Glad you're enjoying it, anyway.****

****Andrithir: Looking back, I see what you mean. Although my current structuring is a bit too deeply ingrained for me to change it reliably, I'll make an effort to make the dialogue structuring more clear in the future. ****

****RecklessBaka: Councils have made a bit of a reputation for themselves over the years, haven't they? :)****

****Toa Banshee: Don't tell me I don't know Flipyap! Flipyap and I went to nipple academy together! XD****

****Anyway, that about wraps it up! Stay tuned!****

12. Chapter 12

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 12****

The towering Guta matriarch roared, swinging her clawed arms at the two intruders in her den. The two scattered, each letting off a wave of burning orange shots as they strafed around the rampaging beast. Only serving to anger the creature more, she renewed her assault, slashing at the nearest armoured invader.

Several smaller Guta lay dead nearby, victims to the surprise assault. Samus and the Chief had snuck in while the family slept, succeeding in killing two with quick blades through the sleepers' spines, only for the others to wake at the pungent smell of their kin's blood. Now only the mother remained. She was larger than the others, with wrinkled, leathery skin, beady black eyes and one hell of a temper. She roared again, the cacophony shaking the cave walls, as yet more shots burned at her skin.

Down on the ground, the two hunters were growing fatigued. The beast was resilient, soaking up damage like a sponge. They couldn't risk getting close without putting themselves in considerable danger, but their weapons were ineffective. They couldn't switch to anything heavier without risking bringing down the ceiling, either.

The Chief rolled behind a rock, looking down at the assault rifle in his hands. He needed a higher calibre. At his command, the gun grew, sprouted an extra barrel and bulked up considerably. He reared up,

slammed the heavy machine gun down on a crevice in the rock, and let rip a fresh barrage into the enraged animal's back. To his gratification, he saw spurts of blood bursting from the monster's skin, and it stumbled under the fire. His satisfaction didn't last, however. Seeking the source of the new pain, the matriarch span around and bore down on him, huge, scythe-like talons set to cut him to ribbons. He barely got out of the way in time, the Hephaestus reconfiguring for portability as he dove.

Samus had seen the fresh wounds too. Firing a few more charged shots at the creature, she helped her compatriot to his feet, teeth gritted under her helmet.

"This is too slow. We need to get in close." She barked into the comm. The Chief fired the Hephaestus again, now a pistol, and the two scattered from the next tireless charge thrown their way.

"What do you propose?" He grunted back.

"You distract it while I get some air. I'll mount it, do some damage, repeat."

"Fine." He replied. He switched his pistol for an SMG, holding it in one hand and spraying at the Guta, manually flaring his shields to attract attention. It worked. The mother pursued him once again, claws raking gouges in the stone where he had been mere seconds ago. Samus had clambered to the top of a support beam, and awaited her opportunity. Given how the enemy raged, she didn't have to wait long.

The instant it came within range, she leapt down, locking her legs around its head and sinking her blade into its neck.

It gave a shriek of pain, flailing its arms in an attempt to dislodge her. Again and again she plunged the blade into it's flesh, but to little effect. Another swing of a long arm clipped her head, almost dislodging her, and she had to grab a tusk to avoid being thrown off. An idea occurred to her. An explosive charge down the gullet wouldn't damage the surroundings. But she was in danger of being eaten herself if she shoved her cannon down its throat...

"Remote charge!" She yelled. Down on the ground, the Chief nodded, realising the plan. He mentally flicked through the blueprints in his suit and pulled up an explosive charge. It began to form in his hand, a rounded orange cylinder with a printed energy yield. The number was reassuringly large.

He lobbed it through the air, over the wild slashing of the doomed beast, down to the rider on top of it. She lashed it with the grapple beam, and in one motion, wrenched the monster's mouth open, pushing the charge into its maw. The Guta began retching, and Samus vaulted off, landing behind it. She quickly got behind cover and nodded at her partner.

Scarcely a thought later, the walls were painted with blood.

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"How did you find that, then?" Samus asked.

They sat in a diner, only a few miles from the mine where they had completed their bloody work. Their employer had been less than happy about the mess, but acknowledged that elder Guta were very tough customers, and was pleased by the lack of damage to equipment and supports. They'd left with a sizeable bonus, and quite the appetite. So to this place they went, a retro-styled diner on a busy street corner in a nearby town. Booths occupied the window space, a bar and tables filling up the rest. There was a lot of red leather and chrome.

Looking up from his meal, the Chief shrugged at her question.

"Okay." He intoned between mouthfuls. "Work is work." Samus swallowed a bite of her own meal and snorted in response.

"With a mentality like that, what kept you going in the quiet years?" She asked.

"There were no quiet years. I killed rebels until the Covenant showed up. I killed Covenant until the Flood showed up. I killed Flood until the whole mess ended. No time for recreational murdering."

"TouchÃ©." She conceded. The Chief polished off the last of his food and set the cutlery down on his plate, before posing his own question.

"So, you find this sort of thing fun?"

"No point sticking with a job you don't enjoy. There's a galaxy of opportunity out there, might as well make the most of it." She frowned at him. "Don't you enjoy your work?" It was a good question.

"I... Haven't exactly done much else." He thought a second. "Is King of the Hill a major sport now?"

"No. And even if it was, I doubt you'd even qualify. One look and the judges would throw you out for steroid abuse."

"Hmm. Better stick to what I'm good at for the time being then. It's not unpleasant at least."

"Yeah." She agreed.

The diner's waitress came over to give them the bill, and Samus quickly signed it away, getting up from her seat in the booth they occupied. "I'm going to head back to the ship. Feel free to wander around town for a while. Just be back before our parking permit expires." He nodded, and she left. He left not long after.

As she made her way back to the ship, he wandered through town looking for a clothes shop, having remembered the morning's lack of choice. The first one he came across seemed appropriate enough, by what was in the window, so he stepped inside.

Luckily, there were shirts, trousers and such in his size, although they seemed to be marketed at another, probably slightly bigger

species. He picked up as many clothes as he thought he was likely to need, several pairs of socks, underwear, shirts, and so on. As he bent down to pick up his basket, the thin jacket he was wearing tore. He picked out a hardier looking one and strode to the till.

As the cashier scanned the bundle of items, the cumulative price flashing up and being deducted from his account, it suddenly struck him how much money he had. Bounty hunting paid exceedingly well. A quick bit of mental arithmetic in his head estimated that he'd only have to work for a few years like this until it would be possible to comfortably retire. Samus had been doing this for years, possibly even a decade or two. What did she do with it all?

Lost in thought about what exactly he was going to do with his rapidly accrued wealth, he took a wrong turn on his way back to the spaceport, ending up in a part of town he didn't recognise. When he realised, a scowl broke out on his face and he began retracing his steps. Then he stopped. There was a statue on his left, in front of a small, windowed building. Normally this would not bother him, but the bronze figure, shining dully in the sunlight, was a very familiar guise. It wore Mjolnir, or a sculpted impersonation of it. Mark V. The larger-than-life figure had its head raised, staring out over the roofs of the surrounding small buildings from its lofty perch on a stone plinth.

He walked towards it. What was it doing here? Why display such a thing? He bent down to read the grimy plaque set into the plinth. Wiping the dirt away with a finger, he read the embossed text.

The Spartan Memorial Museum, it read. In memory of the many fallen warriors.

He stood up and looked at the modest, old white building behind the statue. It certainly wasn't much. Then again, he thought, Spartans were never that prominent in the public eye. Hell, they only revealed the programme's existence as a morale booster for a seemingly doomed species. By the looks of the building, it used to be something else, like a hospital. It was probably unofficial.

A smile graced his face. Nice to know someone cared enough about them to shell out for a huge bronze statue. Ironical it was on Reach, where it all began...

He couldn't just leave without going inside. So past the statue he walked, in through the sliding doors of the museum. At the desk was a long-haired, glasses-wearing woman, feet up and nose buried in a magazine. Hearing the doors open, she looked up, the expression on her face bearing a look of surprise. Evidently the place didn't get many visitors.

"Umm... Hi." She said. "Welcome to the museum, entry is... Uh... Hang on a minute." She rummaged around in a pile of papers on the desk. "Uh... Oh. We're meant to be closed today." She blinked and threw the paper away. "Whatever. Never mind. How's about twenty for a ticket?"

He slid over a chit and she waved him past. As he walked into the foyer, she tailed after him. "Hey, you want a guided tour?" She asked. "I don't have anything better to do. No extra charge." He shrugged and nodded, and she smiled. "Right then! How about we start

by the wall?" She walked past him and he followed, stopping by the far wall. It was metal, meticulously cleaned, unlike the outside statue. On it were four headings, each a Roman numeral. I, II, III and IV. Under each number, a list of names trailed on, carved in small writing. The woman explained.

"Every Spartan that ever lived. From the Ones to the Fours. We've got a digital catalogue of them too. How every one of them lived and died. Here, I'll bring it up for you." She pressed a button near the base of the wall and a blue hologram flashed up. He nodded absentmindedly, his eyes rolling down the list of names. Every Spartan. His eyes flashed over the II column. He knew every name there. Every one. Fred, Kelly, Linda, Sam, all there, rank, name, number and date of death. A few from the I's and III's stood out, and none from the IV's. He didn't even know a fourth generation existed.

There were thousands of names on the wall, thousands of stories. All ending in death, peaceful or violent. Wait. Not all of them.

His name was there too. John-117. A blank space where his date of death would be. The woman didn't seem to recognise him. Could he possibly...

"Why doesn't he have a date?" He pointed at his own name. She smiled.

"Oh, the Master Chief? He's the only one who was actually MIA. Funny, right? I mean, they never stamped KIA on any Spartan records, to keep up morale, you know? And then he goes off and does that. Apparently he just showed up again, after all this time. It's amazing. Maybe it'll drum up some new visitors."

"Hmm." He replied.

"Let me know when you want to move on." She smiled, giving him some space. For the longest time, he just stared at the names. In a way, it made him feel... Small. He was but one of many, many Spartans. And now he was the last one left.

He searched through the catalogue for a few minutes, reading through a few select entries. He wanted to know how his team died.

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He walked around the various wings of the museum, shopping bag in hand, learning more about the museum itself than the project it archived. The woman's name was Lauren. The museum had been set up by her grandfather, who had been enraptured by the stories of Spartans as a child. There was a much larger Spartan Museum on Earth, but this small one was still subsidised by the Federation according to its heritage policies. It was a good thing, as apparently he was the only visitor in months.

Some of the items on display were surprising. Documents detailing "recruitment" protocol, reports of botched augmentations. There were even a few suits of Mjolnir, encased in huge glass tubes, of variants he'd never seen. Mass-produced for the fourth generation of warriors, stronger, lighter and cheaper.

Before long, Lauren brought him back to the Foyer.

"Right then, sir. If there's anything else you'd like to see, just let me know." He looked around. He wasn't sure he wanted to see any more. It was touching to know somebody cared enough about him, and all the others, enough to build this. But it also reminded him of the fact it was all gone, forever. But perhaps that was what he needed to remember. All ties to that life had been cut away by the march of time. He was alone now, whether he liked it or not.

Well, not quite alone. Aran was a companion of sorts. She understood his trials, and he understood hers. They weren't exactly friends yet, but they could relate. It was highly likely they would split soon, though. And he didn't think he wanted that. He needed someone to watch his back. That, and he didn't have much of a direction on his own.

"Sir?" He blinked and shook his head. He'd wandered off again. That was a habit that he needed to break.

"Sorry." He mumbled. "Thanks for the tour."

She smiled, and opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a noise at the door. They looked to the entrance, where another crowd of reporters was bundling their way through the double doorway, brandishing notepads and microphones.

"Wha-? Who... Who are you?" Lauren stuttered, clearly not accustomed to seeing so many people in the building at once. She looked to John. "Who are they?"

He gave her a smile of his own.

"Free publicity." He said. And off he went, bursting through the crowd and running off down the road, leaving Lauren to the reporters, a shocking revelation and probably much higher ticket sales.

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Samus, having also been swamped by reporters on her way back to the ship when she stopped by a shop to look at some interesting tech, was getting a little annoyed. She'd had her fair share of fans and reporters in the past, but never this much. Was the whole debacle worth the bother it brought? The only benefits so far seemed to be more money, which she already had plenty of, and a couple of fancy gizmos, only half of which worked.

The reporters had been forced to quit their chase at the dock, so now she sat in the cockpit, waiting for the Chief. She let her head roll back, and a sigh escape her lips. It was probably the critical mass of heroism travelling as one unit. Nobody wanted to miss out on the two big stories coming at once, the long-dead war hero and the redeemed galactic saviour. She'd probably get more peace and quiet when he left.

...Then again, there would be disadvantages to that. He was useful. As a unit, they could theoretically take on jobs twice as big, save twice as many lives. And she had to admit, he did provide a form of

companionship Adam couldn't. The AI couldn't go drinking, for one.

The doors to their hangar slid open in front of her, and she sat up to see if she could finally get going. The Chief walked through the door, and she beamed him aboard.

"What took you?" She asked.

"I found myself in a museum." She shrugged, and he was left thinking a little about the double meaning of that statement. He dropped the clothes in his room and returned to his seat as Adam booted up the launch sequence, ready to bring them back into orbit. "So, where to next?" He asked Samus.

"Back to Daiban. I want my active camo fixed before our next mission."

"Alright. What will that be?"

"Covert data extraction from an embedded jungle research facility."

"Are you sure that your armour is suited to that? Luminous orange?"

"That's why I want the camo module fixed." There was the tiniest edge to her voice. Perhaps he'd touched a nerve. Probably not a great start if he wanted to stay long-term.

Adam took them into orbit, and then smoothly out through the void, back to Daiban.

****I'm back, bitches!****

****No, wait, that was uncalled for. I'm sorry. Anyway, here I am. You've had your chapter, hope you enjoyed it! Sorry it took so long, but... You know what, you probably don't want to hear excuses, so I won't give you any. I'll just get to replies.****

****trininjakiller, SilenceCmdr, and generally everyone who reviewed about the alcohol thing: I double-checked the lore and the only thing Spartans metabolise faster than anyone else is lactic acid. That means they recover from muscle pain faster, nothing to do with alcohol. So, despite him being a big guy, his liver isn't well-practised. XD****

****TheBarbarianKing: Definitely a good game. I'm about halfway through 2, but have got a bit sidetracked. Of the two, I definitely prefer the first one, though. Was a bit disappointed by the Metroid offering at E3 a few weeks ago, though.****

****Jacob Poke: Glad you like it, and note taken!****

****Archwar: I tried to make dialogue a bit clearer in this chapter. If you can, I'd greatly appreciate it if you could highlight any problems for me. Glad you like the rest of it!****

****ThePeaceKeeper: No pairing here, sorry.****

****TheAccursedHunter01:** I knew the suit was semi-organic and linked to Samus, but wasn't there an instance where a specific part of her ship was damaged and she was unable to activate the Power Suit? The wiki says it happened in Zero Mission. A situation like that hasn't come up here, but I'm just trying to consolidate. As for activating it during the bar fight, the situation wasn't too dangerous, and it would have destroyed her anonymity there, but I didn't say any of that, which is my fault. ******

****Okay,** I guess that wraps it up. Probably only one, maybe two chapters left now, guys. I'll try to have it out in reasonable time. Until then, stay frosty.******

13. Chapter 13

****Souls of Steel: Resurrection Chapter 13****

The Valkyrie slowed to a cruising speed above Daiban once again, and slowly descended through the atmosphere towards the capital. Adam sent off a ping to air traffic control, requesting landing at the spaceport nearest the Federation Headquarters. A moment later, a response arrived.

"Private Light Cruiser, designate Valkyrie, you are not, repeat, not cleared to dock at the North port. Bays are full, due to an unanticipated influx of ships. Please, dock at bay GC-806 in the East port." Samus scowled.

"Damn it. It's three miles to the GFHQ from there." Adam appeared on his pedestal.

"Just get the tram, Samus. It's a Tuesday afternoon, it won't even be crowded."

"Fine." She looked to the Chief. "Anything you want from the engineers?" He thought, then shook his head. "Alright then." She looked back to the windscreen, and began to guide them down to the bay.

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They disembarked and the two went their separate ways. As Samus left the hangar bay, it struck John that he didn't have anything to do. In fact, that seemed to be the case an alarming amount of the time now. Samus navigated, flew the ship, took care of diplomacy, administration, job hunting, and pretty much everything else. He shot things occasionally. That was a mite depressing. And it didn't help that there wasn't much he could do about it. He was still effectively a guest on the Valkyrie.

Standing around moping wasn't going to get him anywhere. Since this seemed to be their hub for resupplying and such, he might as well get to know the area.

He trudged out into the street and began to amble along, taking in the sights, from the flying cars overhead to the animated advertising boards jutting occasionally from the pavement. The streets were reasonably vacant, it being during working hours, so he could clearly see into shop fronts, and he glanced in every so often, if only to

help map the locale out. As he was preparing to cross a road, he felt something light and spongy impact his back and bounce off. He turned around to see a Huragok, rather in a flap from the collision.

"Sorry!" It blurted in its digital voice, still flailing. "It's hard for us to control ourselves at velocity!" The chief scanned over the creature. It had a box wrapped up in its thicker tentacles, on which a stamp was visible. A parcel. On a mail run then. He gave the alien itself a bit more focus, and it clicked in his head. The voice, the look.

"Bob, wasn't it?" The engineer righted itself and returned the Spartan's gaze.

"Why, yes, I- Oh, Mr...!" Well, the recognition went both ways, evidently.

"Are you in a rush?"

"Um, why, yes! The post is emptied in five minutes, and this needs to be shipped today, so-"

"I can probably move faster than you. I'll do it."

"You would? Oh, many thanks! It's down there, third on the right." He gestured with a feeler. "Meet me back here when you're done, and I'll see about what I can do to repay you."

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A two quick runs down the road later, the two were on their way back to the Valkyrie. Bob had offered to juice up the engines a little in the way only Huragok knew how. Samus seemed to trust him, and if it was an issue, Adam was still around and could veto any changes.

Arriving in the bay, a quick chat with the AI opened up the external maintenance panel, and the floating fixer got to work, tentacles in the sensitive machinery, tiny microscopic cilia manipulating the smallest nuances of each component. Though apparently it didn't require much thought, as he could still keep up a conversation perfectly well. John sat down on a nearby crate and stared out at the view through the open bay windows as Bob started up.

"So, what were you doing when I bumped into you?" He asked.

"Nothing." Came the truthful reply. "Just taking a walk."

"I see. What's Miss Aran up to, then?"

"Getting a software patch for her suit. The active camouflage module bugged out in the middle of a hostage situation."

"Ah. Right. Was anyone..."

"Everyone made it out alive."

"Oh. Good. And... You don't have anything to do?"

"No. My suit works well."

"No, I mean... No hobbies? Interests to pursue in your off-time?"

"I don't really have time to pick up a sport on our day-long rest stops."

"Some skills stay around. You much of a driver?"

"Does combat driving count?"

"If you can drive in a firefight, you can drive on a motorway." He withdrew his tendrils from the particular part he was working on. "I love driving. Of course, it's a different experience for me-" He waved his feelers in front of him to demonstrate. "-but it's amazing nonetheless. The speed, the power, the idea of the machine working perfectly beneath me... Do you get that?"

"Hmm. I guess so." In the end, a vehicle was just a tool, and in his experience they usually ended up as shrapnel within an hour of him touching the wheel, so he never got attached to them. But just as there was satisfaction to be found in using a weapon well, there was the thrill in high-intensity driving.

"Have you considered that, just for a bit of fun? You don't seem to be the kind of man to relax much, but racing is quite popular in the west end of the city."

"What kind of vehicle?"

"Anything, really. There's a set of rough guidelines, must have two or more wheels, must use one of a certain list of fuels, etcetera, etcetera. They're all heavily modified, of course."

"Hmm. Not sure I could justify spending that much on a hobby."

"Ha ha, you should see how much of her rewards Miss Aran spends on-"

"Bob, I really wouldn't..." Adam piped up from an external speaker.

"Fine, fine..." The alien jiggled in amusement. "But believe me, it's a lot." John raised an eyebrow, but let the point drop.

"I might be persuaded if it was combat-ready..."

"Pfft. With flash generation tech, a vehicle can gain or shed two tonnes worth of armour plating in five seconds. Add another ten for an engine swap-out and tire change." He got stuck into another panel. John contemplated the idea a while longer. A vehicle would be a tactical asset even if he never used it recreationally. Having it instantly deployable in a manner similar to his suit was a plus too. And he could damn well afford it.

Why the hell not then?

"Then I guess you've got a customer." Bob turned, seemingly a little surprised. "I saw your shop front on the way back."

"Hey, I wasn't trying to sell!" He got a look. "Okay, maybe a little..."

"Finish up in there and we'll head down there. You'll have to teach me a thing or two..."

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Samus sat in the tram to the Galactic Federation Headquarters site. People came and went from the place very often indeed, for anything from housing development to galactic shipping organisation, so much so that it warranted a public service aid. Luckily it wasn't packed, her vessel in the floating line of carriages gliding down the main roads of the city only containing her, an old woman opposite her, and a large, ice-encased alien form on the other end. And they were all as irate as the next one.

Despite the time of day and week, the streets were clogged like an autumn drain in that part of town. Inexplicable. For what seemed like the fiftieth time in the last half hour, the tram decelerated, bouncing the passengers in their seats, and an exasperated voice rang in on the tannoy.

"Once again, we apologise for any inconveniences caused by the delays. A large convoy of government transport vehicles has occupied the crossroad ahead." The frozen alien along the carriage groaned, reaching out to push the stop button with one massive finger. Samus decided she would join him. She could get to GFHQ faster on foot. What kind of vehicle convoy took this long to-

A far-off explosion sounded, causing the carriage to rock slightly in the air. Following shortly after, the faint sound of panicked screaming.

Samus didn't need another cue. In an instant, she was up, by the doors, and reaching for the emergency door release. Slamming her fist down onto the large red button, the doors slid open, letting the high winds flow into the carriage. With little more than a quick glance downwards, she was out through the window, her clothes morphing in midair into the Zero Suit, allowing the Power suit to form around it, until she hit the road's surface with a grunt and a metallic clang. From here, she could see the explosion's smoke, emanating from the next junction, billowing up into the sky. Whatever caused it, it had been big. Very big.

She began to move towards it as quickly as possible. Whether it was an accident or not, civilians would need help. Weaving between vehicles and staring bystanders, the site became gradually more visible. In the centre of the square lay a massive hulk of a vehicle, a huge black tanker, twenty feet high and occupying three lanes, torn open by an explosion. Under the explosion's scorching, the Federation logo was just visible, along with a few fragmented words, one being prison. A prison transport. Maximum security. The filled spaceport, the jams... This was the cause.

It was looking less like an accident by the second.

Its cohort of escort vehicles was scattered around it, mostly overturned or otherwise disabled. Among their number were tanks,

light armoured jeeps, all toting the GF insignia. A few personnel were clawing their way out of the wreckage, coughing and recoiling from the picture of chaos around them. Civilians ran in all directions, trying to escape from the site, some dragging injured friends to safety.

Stopping at the entrance to the square, Samus switched visors and quickly scanned the area. Emergency services were still ten minutes away. No apparent hostiles detected. The inner shell of the main transport appeared intact, but it was impossible to determine any remaining life signs. The more lightly plated civilian and escort vehicles, however... Twelve life signs still inside, immobile or moving in a manner indicating being unable to escape. Four of them were in vehicles indicating structural damage, two of which were on fire.

She was about to get to work, when a man ran straight past her. This wouldn't be anything unusual, were it not for the fact that rather than running away, or to the aid of a trapped driver, he was moving directly towards the crashed transport. What's more, he was carrying heavy machinery, a barebones metal cubic rig with what looked like a laser cutter on two perpendicular rails. He was about to try to open the transport.

Her arm shot out as he pushed past, seizing him by the back of his jacket collar. She pulled him back, his legs flying out from under him as he hit the ground, the cutting rig dropping from his grip. He cried out as he hit the ground, opening his eyes to the sight of her cannon's barrel.

"What are you doing here with that?" She barked. He looked up at her in terror, scrambling back on his hands. She moved with him, at the same time giving him a look-over. Fake leather jacket, cargo pants. Inconspicuous but combat-ready. Obviously trying to open the tanker, but for what? Who was on board? "Answer me!" She insisted.

"Help!" He shouted, the noise's range severely limited by the surrounding furore. He made another backward movement and his jacket fell open, revealing a logo sewn into the lining. A human handprint in black ink, with the letters "SS" cut in in white.

She didn't get as far as the lettering beneath, as something hard, heavy and quite invisible smashed into her visor. She flew back, flipped and landed on her feet, pointing her arm cannon in front of her. The human man had gotten to his feet and was again running towards the transport, but he clearly hadn't been the one who hit her...

The answer soon became clear. Out of the thin air in front of her, two figures faded into view. Both were tall, imposing creatures, roughly humanoid, but covered in a barbed, almost crystalline crimson carapace. Their bodies warped in an insectoid manner, becoming painfully thin at some points, then thick and bulbous in others. Each arm held a sharp, mantis-like scythe, with each foot's two toes sporting armaments just as sharp. Most disturbing of all, their heads were completely separate from their bodies, floating in the slight concave above their bodies, tethered by some invisible force, with a single red eye gleaming from its teardrop centre.

These were Kriken, a ruthless and conniving race from a far-flung

galactic empire, lurking on the edge of Federation space like a panther waiting to strike. What the hell were they doing this far into GF territory?

The pair raised laser rifles attached to their right arms, pointing them at her.

"Stay out of this, hunter." One hissed. "We are merely reclaiming one of our own." What? A captured Kriken? That was a first. She raised her own arm cannon in response.

"I don't like the sound of that." Their weapons whined, warming up.

"Stand. Down." The second one threatened.

"Or what?" Samus spat back.

"Or our unfinished business is dealt with, here and now." This was a new voice.

All three fighters turned to the source, emanating from a fresh hole in the wall of the transport. The human had successfully applied the cutter to the exposed inner wall, and now a third Kriken stood in the rectangular hole left behind. This one was smaller, lacking a combat skin and with his spines and claws trimmed short, presumably by the Federation staff for their own safety. But Samus recognised him.

"Trace." He was a bounty hunter, from the whole sordid ordeal with Gorea and the Ultimate power. He'd slunk off at the end, and here he was again. A prisoner of the Federation, no less.

He didn't immediately acknowledge her, instead turning to the man next to him.

"Your organisation has been helpful. The Emperor will leave Sol to humanity when our conquest is complete, so long as we can count on your support during the wartime."

"Yes, of course." The man grinned, and ran off, quickly mixing in with the chaotic crowd. Trace turned to Aran.

"Specist terrorists. So manipulable. Anyway, don't mind us, Aran. We were just leaving."

"After all this? No way. The only way you're leaving is in another one of those," She gestured to the transport. "...or in a body bag." Trace bristled, the Kriken equivalent of a frustrated sigh.

"Oh, this is just great." He began to lament. "I finally get another shot at attaining heroic standing, and my whole operation just had to be compromised. Not only that, I get demeaned, mutilated, and have to rely on humans to free myself. Oh, the Emperor will not be pleased... Come, Lene, Rumo. We're leaving."

One of the other Kriken moved, and Samus jumped in her skin. He had thrown a package to Trace, which unfolded in midair, forming what looked like a small shield generator and weapon. He caught the expertly, slapped them on, and jumped to the ground.

Suddenly, all three Kriken became invisible, a natural adaptation of their species made exponentially more effective by technological advancement. She jumped back, dodging a potential swing, and landed on her feet. Seeing no incoming beams, she switched visor again. The world turned grayscale as the embedded X-Ray software initiated, showing Samus three ghostly, spiky stick figures moving quickly away from the scene.

For a moment she dithered. She could go after Trace or save the trapped civilians. Not both.

The sound of nearby sirens cemented her choice, and she ran off after them.

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On the other side of town, Bob and John were inspecting a monitor and holographic projection, going through various structures and functions for his "personal transport", as Bob put it. It was definitely a different experience to the one the Chief had been expecting. It seemed that flash generation had taken all the oil, toil and manual labour out of being a mechanic. Instead of the Huragok's workshop being a dingy, busy place filled with tools, jacks and assorted industrial lubricants, it was a plain, well-lit room with a holo-projector, a raised building platform for constructing vehicles from their digital blueprints, and a lot of computers.

Though the pair were well-occupied, the long loading times of Bob's heavily overclocked but nonetheless 'ancient' tech left a lot of room for conversation.

"So, when did Huragok learn to enjoy anything other than maintenance?" Bob chuckled at that.

"About a hundred years back. One botched reproductive process made a Huragok that enjoyed social interaction more than wafting around, feelers in a circuit board, and after seeing how happy she was, every one of us wanted the change made." The Chief nodded, and the computer next to them pinged. "Ah! Excellent. That's the last of the functional stuff. Now it just needs a lick of paint, and it's ready to hit the road. Any preferences?"

"Green camo." If the Chief had had more experience with Engineers, he would have recognised Bob's expression as a cringe.

"Are you sure?"

"...Wait, black for the civilian version." Bob inwardly sighed in partial relief.

"Alright then..." He tapped on the keyboard, and the finished product appeared in full on the projector, cycling through its two modes, one light, fast and conventional-looking, for use in the city, the other armoured, shielded, and sporting 40mm shaped charge autocannons for... rougher neighbourhoods. Embossed on one, stencilled on the other was the name: The Panther. Bob turned to the now proud owner.

"Test drive?" He asked.

Before he could reply, there was a soft, far-off boom, and the ground shook. The pair looked at each other. That was an explosion. Explosions were bad, and at this political climate, rarely an accident.

"I need to find out what that was."

"The fast one then?"

"Yes."

"Okay then. Remember your helmet."

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Samus charged after the three fugitives, who had headed straight down the west-facing road, bobbing and weaving between vehicles and pedestrians, the only apparent signs of their passing being the clack of claws on the ground and a small gust of wind in their wakes. As the confused and frightened populace milled by, Samus began to have trouble keeping up. There was nowhere near enough empty ground to build up significant speed, and unlike her, the Kriken weren't bothered by the prospect of forcibly relocating any obstructions. They were pulling ahead, and she couldn't stop them.

She began building a message to the Federation military, when the three aliens jumped into a parked vehicle, a commercial transport truck, painted white and emblazoned with an inconspicuous food company logo, apparently their getaway ride. Two took the cabin, the third the back doors. The engine roared into life and it took to the air, hovering a few feet off the ground. The driver wasted no time, immediately smashing through the lines of traffic and turning off the road.

Samus glanced at the sign affixed to their taken route. They were turning to get onto the intercity superhighway. They probably had a cloaked getaway ship parked somewhere along its length. She swerved to follow them, knowing that she'd gained an advantage. Heavy vehicles weren't made capable of flying higher than the bottom layer of traffic for safety reasons, and the highway would be largely empty. She could build up speed, activate the Speed Booster, tweak it to an appropriate speed and keep pace. From there it was just a matter of picking them off or disabling the vehicle.

The truck swerved into the tunnel to the highway, smashing straight through the toll booth, and she neatly rounded the corner after it. Through the tunnel they went, allowing the road to open up into the sky. Civilian vehicles took to the air, while trucks, tankers and transports flew low, barely a foot above the asphalt.

While the truck sped ahead, opening up the engine in lieu of the near-empty way ahead, they wasn't the only one benefiting from it. Samus mentally flicked through a few menus, altering a few parameters here and there, slowly building up speed...

And then, with a sudden electronic whoop, she was away.

Beneath her, her legs whirred by, a literal blur as her suit

actuators helped her limbs go beyond the limits of any normal creature. Her surroundings faded into irrelevance, eyes set on the hunt's quarry. Whilst the Speed Booster could accelerate her to supersonic speeds, that wasn't what she needed right now. The Kriken were pushing their vehicle to the limit, clocking in at over a hundred mph, and she needed to catch up. It wasn't exactly hard. The gap closed extraordinarily quickly, and she was soon running alongside it, the few cars also on their level swerving to avoid their chase.

In the cab of the truck, the driver of the vehicle turned to his compatriot, Trace, nodding at the wing mirror.

"She's keeping pace with us." Trace growled.

"Tell Rumo to roll out plan B as soon as possible. But don't let her get on the vehicle, drive aggressively if you have to. Plan C is for use as a last resort only."

"Yes, sir." The driver began barking into his communicator at the third of their troupe in the back, while Trace observed Samus in the mirror, watching her movement.

Outside, Samus had almost pulled beside the truck, to the point where she could almost see the driver. Her legs slowed markedly to keep pace, and she tried to move closer, only for the vehicle to suddenly and violently swerve. She quickly dialled back her speed, the back end missing her by barely a metre. It began to pull ahead again, and Samus scowled. They had the weight advantage here. They could push her around as much as they wanted. She needed to get on the back, climb in and deal with them from there.

And with that, she gave one last burst of speed and leapt onto the back loading door, her hand finding a ridge to lodge into, as her legs finally stilled. Standing them firmly on the bottom rail of the opening, Samus booted up her cutting laser, and began to slice a doorway in the metal, forming a line of spark-spewing red welts.

"Sir, she's on the back!" Came the cry of the Kriken in the trailer. The driver, Lene, twitched.

"Apologies, sir. Shall I try to shake her off?" Trace looked at him, his one eye blazing disapproval.

"Let me deal with her." He yanked at the glove compartment in front of him, opening a drawer crammed with concussive grenades. He plucked one out, and opened the door next to him, holding onto his seat with one hand. He hooked the pin on one of his clipped spines, tearing it out, and held it over the road. He counted in his head, holding it for a brief moment, and then released.

It bounced once on the road, the truck racing by it until it hung in the air, just by the back. Samus glanced to her side, the movement catching her eye, and her reflexes kicked in a split second too late.

The grenade erupted into a halo of light, sound and force, tearing Samus from her perch. She stretched out to reacquire her grip, but the damage was done. She fell back, the world moving in slow motion

as she braced for the inevitable crunch of her armoured body bouncing off the ground.

Fortunately, an alternative presented itself. In midair, she felt something slip into her outstretched hand, grabbing hard. Her eyes flew open as her course changed, and she was swung onto something. It was John. In civilian attire, no less, save for his armour's helmet. How odd.

Looking down, it got even odder. They were on some sort of motorbike. From what she could see, it was low-set, aerodynamicised to the extreme, a sleek black streak of a vehicle thrumming underneath them. John was bent over forwards, hands on either side of the front wheel, turning two handles she assumed were the steering. She took a moment to steady herself, wedging her feet in two appropriate-looking nooks and holding on to John's shoulder with her one free hand. Sensing she'd settled, John spoke up.

"You all right?"

"Fine. Thanks for the save." He grunted affirmation and revved the engine, pushing it harder. Despite that, however, the truck began to pull ahead of them. John growled.

"Disengage your suit. It's weight and drag we don't need." He was right, she could feel the push of the high winds on her armour's extrusions. The speed booster generated repulsive fields to keep resistance to a minimum while running, but the program was embedded in the module, only active while she was moving, and she didn't have time to dig it out. Likewise, though the suit was light, the gravity suit upgrade making it lighter still, it couldn't fully negate her mass. But she didn't have to just drop it.

"I can keep up on my own." She retorted.

"Yes, but running, dodging and shooting at the same time?" One hand left the front wheel, extending out behind him to her. He was offering the Hephaestus. "I'll keep us steady. You shoot."

Samus looked at the weapon, then her own. What the hell. Disengaging the suit, the extra mass left them, and the vehicle put on a burst of speed. She reached for the Hephaestus, only for him to draw it away.

"Keep the helmet." He almost demanded. She rolled her eyes, and the shell reappeared. Seizing the Hephaestus, the weapon sprung out, hardlight filling the gaps and handing her a neon sniper rifle. She locked her legs tighter around the bike's chassis and rested the rifle on John's shoulder. He veered off to the left, and the side of the driver Kriken's head edged into view. Samus squeezed the weapon, brought the scope to her eye and held her breath. The reticule swung over the blood-red target, and-

"Look out!" John cried. The bike reared under her, and she almost lost her balance. Bringing the gun from her eye, she prepared to glare, possibly give John a dig in the ribs with her knee, only for the anger to quickly dissipate. Out of the top of the truck now protruded a turret, a looming, three-pronged cannon, barbed components centred around a glowing green core. In the seat sat the third Kriken, hear whirring back and forth as he primed the heavy

weapon. Seconds later, it spun into life, the three spikes spinning around the core, which began to pulse menacingly. The Kriken laughed, and, seizing the control sticks up in his perch, swung the deadly device to bear on the two.

"DODGE!" Yelled Samus, and the Chief did exactly that.

A deadly green blast leapt from the gun, shrieking like a banshee, and the Chief swerved to avoid it. Behind them, the concrete road surface erupted into an emerald fireball, spraying debris all around, a few chips pattering over Samus' back. Samus brought the rifle back up, quickly scoping and firing. The round rebounded off the turret's metal plating, making the gunner flinch, but nothing more. He began to swing the turret around for another assault.

Samus tapped her compatriots shoulder, observing their attacker's movement.

"He can't turn very fast." She spoke through the comm, avoiding the rushing wind's disturbance. "Bait a shot on one side then get me to the other, fast as you can." The Chief nodded, and banked far off to the left, allowing the gunner to line up his shot. Samus gripped the rifle tightly, preparing for the sudden movement.

The turret flared and John twisted the wheel, jerking the bike in the other direction. This time the shot was closer, and even from a metre away, the heat was near unbearable. But again, the shot smashed into the ground behind them, and they raced safely away. Samus glanced up, she had been right. The gunner's flank was exposed. She had a clear shot.

In an almost leisurely fashion, she scoped and fired, the round smacking into the Kriken warrior's side, the surprise impact jolting him in his seat, though not piercing his shields. She fired again, this time completely dislodging him. He tumbled from his seat, barely grabbing ahold of the trailer's side, his body dangling over the edge.

John banked back around, and before Samus could deliver her third shot, hit a button on the side-mounted panel. Instantly, the Panther leapt into the air, a propulsive charge on the bottom sending it flying up and forward. The front wheel smashed into the panicking Kriken, breaking his grip and his shields simultaneously. As the Panther hit the ground, so did he, with a great deal less grace.

Leaving the rapidly receding broken body behind them, the duo moved on.

Back in the cabin, the two remaining aliens saw an icon on their HUDs blink and darken.

"Rumo is down." The driver mumbled. Trace twitched, watching the bike in his wing mirror. Just his luck. Not only had his second chance at fame and fortune gone down the drain, he'd endured a humiliating stay in enemy custody, a humiliating escape, Aran of all people had been right outside when he got out, and even as he looked like he might successfully impede her, it turns out that she, the lone wolf bounty hunter, has backup! Well-equipped backup, at that!

He'd be lucky to escape with a career in the gladiatorial arena after this many failures...

"Sir!" Lene's cry interrupted his admittedly badly-timed bout of pessimism. "What do we do? We've still got a ways to go before we reach the ship..."

"We exhaust our resources." Trace replied. "To glory or shame, we must return to the Imperial court. Set the turret to autofire, in case they fall behind and step into its cone of vision. Then, keep your head down. I'll hold them off." The driver pressed a button on the truck's heavily modified dashboard, and the turret whined back into life behind them. Trace ripped the grenade-laden drawer in front of him open once again, this time hanging as many as he could on the ends of his spines, forming a makeshift tactical vest. Shouldering his laser rifle, he kicked his door open and clambered atop the cab, talented feet digging in while his natural camouflage concealed him. He found his target easily. They were lining up a shot on his driver. Instantly, he let rip with his rifle, a shower of red beams descending on his pursuers and exposing his presence. The shots went slightly wide, but managed to push them back. Samus, riding on the back, looking bizarre in just her helmet and undersuit, changed targets, pointing her sniper at him. He ducked low, out of her sight, and tore a trio of grenades from their perches. He cooked them for a moment, then cast them off, letting them bounce and detonate. There was a brief feeling of power there, watching the bike frantically turn to avoid, his foes recoiling from the disorienting blast. Then it was gone, as they recovered. As he dashed for cover, he saw from the corner of his eye Samus's weapon morph, shortening, fattening. A terrible thought came to him, and he looked frantically to his surroundings.

There were no more cars surrounding them. So far were they through their rampage down the highway, the public had gotten word of the rogue truck, vacating the lower lane. There was nothing to stop his enemy from blowing them out of the water.

From his low cover on the roof, Trace saw a small orange ball fly out from the pair's approximate location, arcing through the air and falling to the ground, right smack in the middle of his truck's path.

"LENE! DODG-" He began to cry, but too late.

Samus pulled the grenade launcher's detonator, and the ground before them erupted into fire.

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Trace's mind clawed its way out of the darkness that had been thrust upon it, emerging into the too-bright sunlight as he lay sprawled on the ground, flat on his back. He groaned and creaked, probing fingers scratching dust and fragments off the breathing membranes hidden in his chest. He wheezed and creaked, swivelling his head to and fro. Not ten metres from where he lay was the flaming wreck of his getaway truck, tipped onto its side, battered, bent and burning. Closer inspection showed the cabin completely engulfed in fire. Well, Lene was dead. That just left him.

Turning dispassionately away from the sight, he checked his HUD. He

was in luck. The high-speed stealth ship the two had brought with them was parked, cloaked, just a few dozen metres away. As his vision cleared, he could just about make out the shimmer of its active camouflage. He was still in the game. He could make it.

His hopes dropped like a stone as he turned his head again. Walking towards him was his pursuer. Aran. Fully armoured.

Mind racing, searching for a plan, he glanced at his shield gauge. He'd taken a hell of a beating during his acceleration. He didn't have anywhere near enough to keep him safe if he ran for it. He'd be dead before he got halfway. Whipping his head around, he saw his gun. He scrambled for it, spines scraping on the ground, but found it blasted away just short of his grasp by a well-placed shot. An iron-plated foot wedged under him and flipped him over, and he found himself staring down the still-hot barrel of an arm cannon.

"Don't move." She spat at him.

"I suggest you do the same." He rasped out. Quick as a flash, he batted her cannon away with one hand, the other snatching at his combat harness' belt. He didn't even have time to check whether he'd grabbed the right thing, but after that split second, he was a few centimetres closer to the ship, and had Plan C in his hand.

On the other end of the gun, Samus cursed herself for getting too close. She knew from personal experience that the Kriken was a dexterous one, why had she let him leverage that? Now he had... Whatever that was in his hand. She was willing to bet it wasn't good.

"Not another twitch, Aran." He growled, raising the small black device above his head. "This is the detonator for a high-dispersal, two-stage, shredder-dirty bomb hidden in the back of that truck. I press this button-" He flicked the cap off, exposing an ominous red button; "-And not only do both of us go home in a watertight box, but everything within a ten kilometre radius will be swimming in gamma radiation for about twenty years."

Samus stiffened. This was a very real threat. Kriken weren't shy about having a suicidal backup plan. The Federation had only ever managed to recover pieces of Kriken bodies before. But they weren't usually radioactive. If he was telling the truth, whoever equipped the rescue party had wanted their money's worth should the operation go awry.

"I've still got enough shield left to deflect your weapons, so don't try anything."

"You seem to be taking it as granted that I believe you." Trace laughed, a grating metallic giggle of a noise.

"I'm taking it as granted that you aren't going to chance it." He replied. Samus, cannon still pointed at Trace, let her hand rise to her helmet to access her comm.

"Chief." She reached out to her compatriot, who had stayed back to check the wreckage. "I need you to check the trailer. Be careful. There may be a bomb."

"Affirmative." He crackled across. Trace tilted his head as his own comm intercepted the transmission.

"A partner? Since when did Samus Aran need someone to help her with anything?"

"I could ask you the same thing, damsel in distress." He giggled again. They waited.

"Samus." The Chief came back in, urgency in his voice. "There is a large unit in here. It's got radiation warning signs on it." Trace's solitary eye pulsed briefly brighter, a Kriken sneer.

"What did I say about terrorists?" He taunted. Samus grit her teeth behind her visor.

"How do I know you won't just blow us to kingdom come once you're clear?"

"It's using a sonic pulse interface module. Excellent security, bad signal range. I'll lose signal once I get into my ship." Samus stared him down. Truth or lies, there was only one option.

She lowered her cannon.

"Good choice, Aran." With his free hand, he plucked another item from his belt and tossed it to the ground. "I was meant to leave this in the dead hands of as high-ranking a Federation officer I could find. But this is good enough." He took a step back, and Samus didn't try to stop him. His eye pulsed again. "So long. Don't worry. You'll get another shot soon enough."

And with that, he disappeared. She didn't try to follow or track him. Moments later, the fires of an engine ignited in the fields beside the road, and a high-invisible blur swept into the sky. The truck didn't explode.

She breathed a sigh of relief. He got away, but it looked like she would as well. She bent down to pick up the object he left behind. A PDA, or something like it. A small screen with a plastic housing and solitary button. Switching it on with her thumb, the screen lit up with green text. It was, quite literally, a declaration of war. A full-length, electronic letter to the GF Council from the Kriken Emperor himself, promising to have their heads mounted on poles in his dining room, among other things.

She sighed. Anyone following fringe politics knew this would happen eventually, it was just a shame she had had to be the one to take the brunt of it. Now she had to evacuate the rapidly accumulating civilians, get the local police to disarm the bomb, deliver the message and give a report. It could have just as easily been handled by the police with the same outcome, and much less bother on her part.

Still. At least it would be good for business.

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Several hours later, Samus and John stepped out of the Federation Council chambers. Rubbing their eyes, they took the lift down to the

lobby. It had been a long day. Reams of paperwork had followed the time-consuming civilian evacuation and authority coordination effort, their frustration further compounded by their original purpose on the planet, fixing Samus' camo. Cap it off with a full verbal account to the Council, and it had taken all day. It was now well into the evening, and both had had little more to eat than a cup of nutrient slurry. Even galactic saviours could be exhausted. It just took something different to bullets, bombs and nail-biting drama. Something much worse. Bureaucracy.

In any case, war had been declared. The Federation Navy was mobilising at the very moment, rushing to reinforce fringe worlds and oversee evacuations. Meanwhile, the two heroes of the day tiredly rode an elevator.

"I need something to eat..." Groaned John as they descended.

"Same." Grunted Samus. "Something expensive would be nice. The war economy will kick in soon. Better grab something good while it's still there." John grunted agreement and they stood in mutually silent discomfort for a moment. It was a tall building. Eventually, John spoke up again.

"Samus. What's your take on this war?" She looked at him and shrugged.

"Too early to tell, really. The Kriken have never put anything out into our space bigger than a privateer rigger. Who knows what their ships are really like? Guns are on par with us, numbers are anyone's guess. Of course, we do have all that new Forerunner data. Could go either way. All I know is I'll be shooting a lot more Kriken than usual pretty soon. The GF doesn't go into a conflict without hiring at least four bounty hunters to help with special ops. That means us."

"Us?" He was giving her a funny look.

"...Yeah. Unless you're reenlisting... Or something?" He shook his head.

"No. I'm just... Another war? Now? So soon?"

"It's not as if your job description is changing much from it. You just shoot at a different colour bogey and get paid a lot more."

"I know. Just... It's the principle." She laughed at that.

"Bit late to be having second thoughts about shooting people, John." He huffed.

"You don't get it."

"Damn right I don't. We're killers. That's what we do. Sure, we could do something else if we wanted to, but do we? No. You could have been anything you wanted to be, but you came back to the battlefield." He didn't respond to that for the longest time.

"...I just don't want to be a soldier again. I made a promise to someone."

"You're not a soldier. You get paid more. And you can ditch whenever you want. You're your own boss."

"But my motivation hasn't changed. I'm doing it for the same reason." Samus frowned. What was his problem?

"So what? Don't tell me you saved all sentient life in the Galaxy because someone with epaulettes told you to. Protecting your world is a noble enough goal. No shame in it." Chief sighed. As he did, the lift opened and they stepped out into the reception, then into the cool evening air.

"I don't know. I'm a confused person. Maybe I'll see it after a few drinks." He said resignedly, reaching into his pocket to get the digital key to the parked Panther. It revved into life, and both of them clambered on, helmets spontaneously appearing on their heads.

"Now that's logic I can get behind." Samus smirked.

**This is not "reasonable time". Not in the slightest. I'm so, so sorry. I hope I made up for it with the chapter. Although it took forever, it was an awful lot of fun to write. Something about making up Kriken mannerisms is a lot of fun. And also, you know, car chases. Gotta love 'em. That said, I couldn't really shake the feeling the ending lacked closure. Particularly as this is Part 1's finale.
**

**Yes, I know it's been mostly setup. Yes, I know by the time I get to writing Part 2 we will all be dead. But if I improve as much from now as I did in my earlier stages of writing, it will be very good. Trust me. Until then, I will be working on Tartarus, which has been on Hiatus far too long. **

Also, if you're not too disgusted by my raucous betrayal of your trust, #HuntThe#HuntTheTruthReference.

And now onto replies.

Happy1K1nob1: Alright, thanks for verifying. I'm working on Tartarus now, so hopefully more of that isn't too far away. As for the RWBY story, I don't watch the show myself, so I won't be able to give character feedback, but I'll be sure to have a look. Sorry it took so long to get that far...

Grocamol: Nope, after them. It's basically continuing from the current 'end' of the Metroid timeline, after Fusion. Nintendo doesn't seem all too worried about continuing it, so I thought I'd have a go.

Guest: I know nothing about Warhammer 40k, so that won't be me.

TheAccursedHunter01: I'm inclined to think that first point was just gameplay over anything else. The kind of system trauma a piercing plasma beam would induce isn't exactly something any living being walks away from. In any case, something's going to get lost reconciling both universe's plasma mechanics. Also, thanks for the verification. :)

****TheKingOfLegends:** Hmm, I think I have enough characters on the go so far. Plus I think I wrote off the possibility of more Spartans with the museum segment. Sorry.**

****Archwar:** Alright, thanks for the help!**

****JollyPayton:** Hopefully soon.**

****DasCheesenborgir:** This random collection of characters does not deserve such fine reviews. I think you see more than I do here. :) As for the Ares, coincidentally, I just finished playing XCOM:EU. I suppose that kind of look is what I was going for, the enclosing, sculpted idea, but with a bit more bulk to Halo-ify it a little. As for overarching plot, yeah, this first part of a trilogy is almost entirely devoted to setup and character establishment, so it's pretty slow going. The next part is where it heats up. And the third where the faeces really hit the fan. Hope I'll see you around when that comes along!**

****Well,** that's it for now. I'll be back with the start of the Kriken war so- Well, not soon, but you get the idea. It's been a hell of a ride. See y'all later. :) **

End
file.